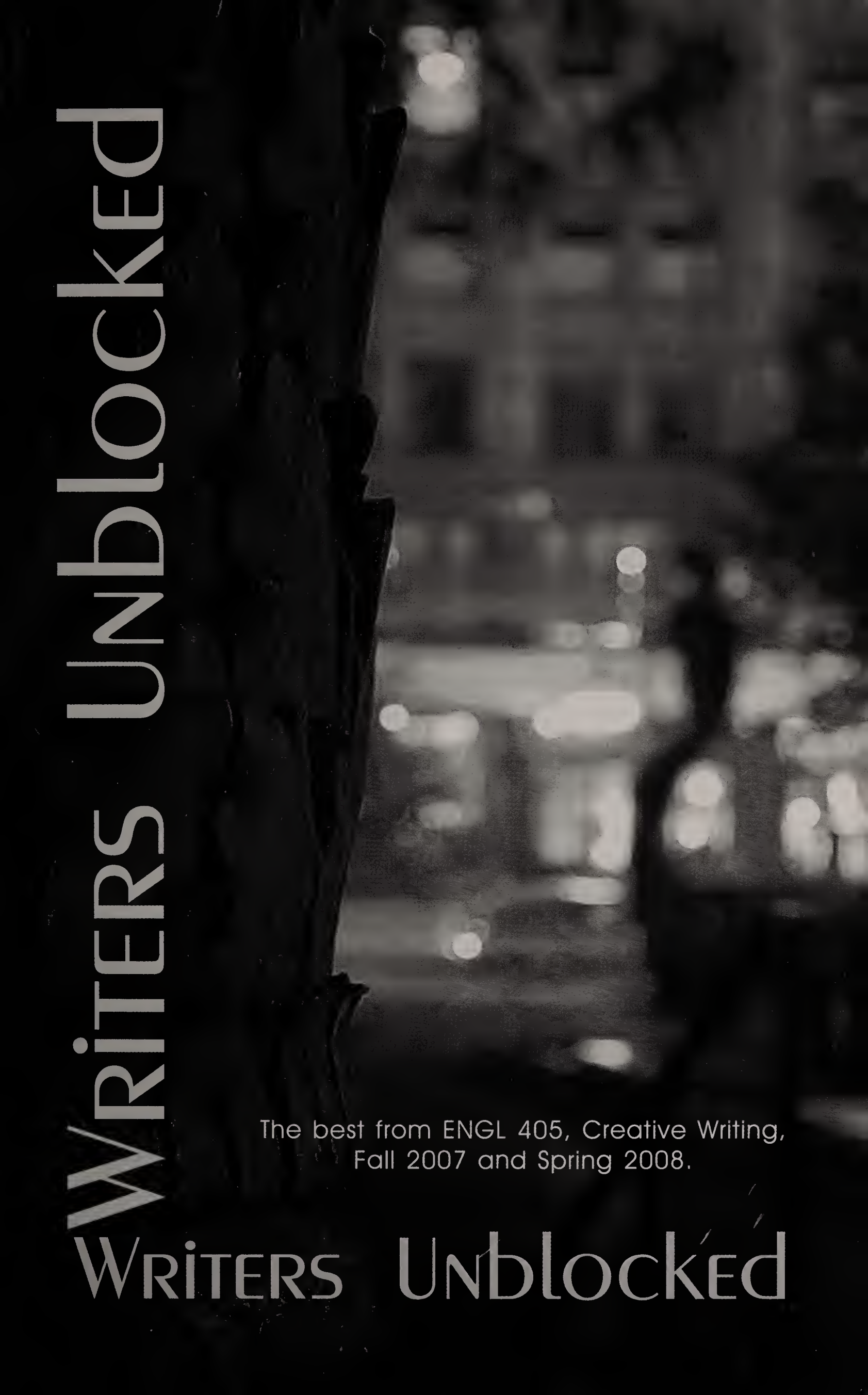

Writers Unblocked

The best from ENGL 405, Creative Writing,
Fall 2007 and Spring 2008.

Writers Unblocked

Writers Unblocked

The best short fiction, poetry, and creative non-fiction
from ENGL 405, Creative Writing,
Fall 2007 and Spring 2008

The Department of English and Philosophy
Purdue University Calumet
Hammond, Indiana

This edition of Writers Unblocked is the second in what we hope will be an annual journal of short stories, nonfiction, and poetry from assignments submitted in ENGL 405, Creative Writing. Student work in this issue represents the best writing, chosen by students and instructors, from classes taught in Fall, 2007 and Spring, 2008.

Everyone likes to tell stories. We all do it every day. But not everyone can write good short stories and good creative nonfiction. The twenty students whose work appears here show themselves to be enthusiastic creative writers, demonstrating the right eye for detail and character that is always the mark of good writing. Works range from the darkly comic, such as "The Shankman" to the celebratory, such as "The Cell." Some are somber, but all are moving in their way. Most, like "Corresponding Shapes," show the changing, awakening self that is the traditional subject of so much fiction, memoir, and poetry.

In addition to creative writing students, this journal is made possible by the collaborative efforts of students in COM/ENGL 302, Publications Design, for Spring 2008, who contributed ideas for cover art and page design. The cover of this journal was chosen by students in that course as the best of many excellent submissions. We are proud of all our creative writing and publications design students, and of their artistic achievements.

We would also like to thank the Department of English and Philosophy, and the Dean of Liberal Arts and Sciences, Dan Dunn, for their generous support of this journal.

Michael Dobberstein
Janine Harrison

Instructors, English 405, Creative Writing
Department of English and Philosophy
Purdue University Calumet

Cover photo and design: Todd Reed,
who also contributed to page design.

Writers Unblocked

Fall 2007 & Spring 2008

Contents

Short Fiction

Even Angels Fall 10
Elisabeth Hoernig

Growing up Christian 17
Aimee Huizenga

Suddenly, Bananas 22
Mark Farner

Confession 32
Sarah Grabarzyk

Miles 40
Alica Fernatt

The Shankman 46
Todd Reed

Cancer Crisis 53
Katie Ramsey

Corresponding Shapes 62
Lauren Comer

Peaches 68
Michelle Moore

Rookie Mistake 72
Ryan Hayes

Ring 79
Kristin Hannagan

Poetry

Final Fall 87
George Fountoulakis

Every Winter 89
Michael Tolliver

Ragged 90
Linda Milom

NonFiction

Naked Peart 92
Joe Hayes

The Cell 98
Krystle Krucek

The Art of Giving Up 101
Lauren Comer

Kelly 105
Greg Rucinski

A Collection of Memories 110
Bianca Gomez

Beeh 114
Kaitlyn Shaw

Reconciliation of Truths 120
Christen Chapman

Short Fiction

Even Angels Fall

Elisabeth Hoernig

It was obvious from her face the pain was overwhelming. Evie couldn't even try opening her eyes without wincing; she tried sitting up only to cringe and lay back down on the bed.

"Evie?" I whispered from nearby, pretty much knowing the condition she was in.

"Who..." she said and winced; even the sound of her own voice was painful enough to bring her to tears. "What do you want," she asked again in a whisper.

I breathed an audible sigh of relief, "It's Bernie, and I'm glad you're finally waking up, I wasn't sure, well with how much you drank last night, how long you were going to be 'out'."

The confused expressions that flitted across her face practically screamed: What happened? How much did I drink last night? What time is it? Where am I?

I responded to unasked questions, "You're safe at the apartment, and the reason for your lovely hangover started last night when you came to visit."

Evie sat up slowly and spoke quietly, "Well, I do remember coming to see you...and getting angry about something...but it gets a bit hazy after that. Care to fill me in?"

I shook my head and laughed sympathetically, "At least you remember getting to the bar. After you came in, you ordered your usual starter: an amaretto stone sour. This red-headed girl sitting a few stools down from you ordered the same thing."

"What do this girl and her drink have to do with why I am waking up feeling used, angry, hurt and with a hangover from hell?" She asked irritated.

"Let me tell the story, ok?" I pleaded with her. "I promise it will make sense, more or less, when I'm done."

She nodded and leaned back against the wall on her soft feather pillow.

I had a feeling Evie was in for quite a story and restarted telling her the events of the night before, "So, you both ordered the same drink, which happens all the time, but this time it seemed really weird. I shook it off, thinking I was making much more out of it than it actually was. I brought you your drinks and kept on doing

my bartender thing when I saw Gavin strut in like he owned the place; he had the usual cocky smirk on his face too. Now at that point I thought I remembered you telling me he had a date or something that night and wasn't going to be able to meet up with you; I know how plans can change, so again, I blew it off as insignificant. Well, until he sat down next to the red-head and gave her a kiss."

I thought her eyes were going to bug out of her head.

"He did WHAT?!" Evie's outburst caused her to physically wince; she carefully placed her head back in the pillow in attempts to ebb the pain.

I patted her on the shoulder and took a deep breath, "I don't like telling this any more than I liked watching it happen last night, so just let me get through this as quickly as possible, please?" I took her nod as my cue to continue. "At first I thought that maybe, just maybe, it was his sister or another female relative. I was not so lucky; the semi-casual kiss on the cheek greeting was followed by a not so casual and much more intimate second kiss. I glanced over in your direction hoping you hadn't seen what just happened. You saw me look over and then waved and pointed to your empty glass. Trying to not give away what I just saw, I made your drink…a little stronger than normal, and handed it to you. I think you were up to four drinks at this point, and well, you looked to be feeling pretty good. Part of me wanted to assume that maybe since you were in a 'happy place' you wouldn't notice them. Well, unfortunately for you the bar was busy that night and I had to really fly around for awhile and by the time I finally got back to you, you had seen Gavin." I paused, "Do you remember anything up to this point, at all?"

Evie picked her head up from the pillow and thought for a moment, "I remember ordering my drink, and the fact that you were busy…and I remember Gavin being there at some point and that I got really upset about something, but I am blanking at this red-head being there."

"Well, I'm not quite done with the story…yet," I muttered.

"Oh dear…well, get on with it then…please." Evie said hesitantly as she put her head half on and half in her pillow.

I could tell she wasn't sure if she wanted to hear the rest of it or not and took another deep breath, "Ok, so when I walked back over to you to see how you were doing, you leaned in and asked me if you were drunk, or if Gavin was really sitting there. I, being pretty much unable to lie to you, told you that yes, in fact, it was Gavin.

Well, you weren't completely drunk, but weren't feeling any pain either. I think one of the other bartenders had been taking care of you a little too well. Anyway, you took out your cell phone, called him, and watched him look at the phone and send the call to voicemail. I was called away to wait on some of my other patrons, but even from the other side of the room, the look on your face clearly showed that his move didn't sit too well with you at all. At some point, I think after another shot, you decided to walk over to him and...um... talk to him in person. Needless to say he was quite surprised to see you walk up, as was his date, and well...it got kind of ugly after that."

"Ugly?"

I nodded.

Evie hesitated and half-buried her head, "Do I want to know what happened?" she mumbled from the pillow, glancing up at me.

I grinned widely, "Oh yes, you definitely want to know what went down. I think you made every woman who has ever been two-timed quite proud. You know the phrase, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned'? Well, you definitely had the fury going."

I thought back to the evening and recalled what had happened:

I glanced over and noticed Evie wasn't in 'her spot' anymore, but was actually standing next to Gavin. It was loud, but that didn't stop her from being heard.

"Hey Gavin!" she half shouted with fake cheeriness, "Why didn't you call me? Did your seminar end early tonight?'

Some of the color drained from his face as the red-head sitting next to him gave him a questioning look, "Well...um...yea it did," he ended lamely in a somewhat self-important tone.

"Oh really now?" Evie replied with sarcastic intrigue, "You told me last week, when I asked if we were meeting up at our usual spot, that you had a bunch of seminars and such tonight, and that there was no way you were going to get out early."

The red-head leaned toward him, "Who's this? You told me you were single and unattached."

"I'm single," Gavin said, almost as if trying to convince himself. He looked toward the bar and happened to catch my eye.

"Oh no mate, do not look at me for help. I wash my hands of whatever crap you just got yourself into," I replied to the unasked question to cover his butt.

The red-head looked slightly amused, "So tell me, Gavie, what exactly have you gotten yourself into? Obviously, as your blonde friend here has said, you are, in fact, NOT in a seminar, nor are you unattached at the moment. So what exactly am I to you? And what is she?"

I could not keep from laughing out loud, "Oh Gavin, you have dug yourself a hole half-way to China, which, ironically enough, is where Evie's drink is from at the moment."

Evie smiled at me, "Is it now? Oh good, I have a feeling I'm going to need this." She knocked back the shot of white rice wine she had been holding for the last five minutes and stared at Gavin, "So, 'Mr. High and mighty', what the bloody hell is going on here?"

The bartenders and I, along with most everyone else there, looked at him expectantly. The bar had fallen unusually quiet for the amount of people present. There was nowhere for Gavin to run or hide; he had no choice but to face both women now, and in front of a bar full of people. I drummed my fingers impatiently on the bar and half glared at him as he squirmed in his seat.

"Well...you see..." he fumbled for words, "my seminar was actually...um... cancelled for this evening."

"Was it really?" the red-head asked dryly, "You told me a few days ago that tonight was wide open, and you had nothing planned and would love to spend it with me."

Gavin looked at Evie, "I don't know what to say."

"Good," she sneered at him, "if you have nothing intelligent to say, then I have something for you to hear." She paused, took a deep, but slightly shaky breath. As she opened her mouth, all the frustration and anguish, pain and anger she had kept bottled up for so many years expelled itself as she threw back another shot and slammed the empty shot glass onto the bar. "You pompous, arrogant, egotistical, two-timing, self-righteous, self-serving, no good, bigheaded, pretentious, ass!" Gavin's jaw dropped slightly in shock at her outburst as the bar fell almost completely silent. Evie was unaware of the silence as she raged on, "What is this, some kind of game to you? What are you trying to prove? That I would fall for you again just so you could drop me...AGAIN?! That you could successfully lead me on and date two women at the same time without either of them knowing? Do you know how much you've hurt me? Do you give a damn? Are you even aware how much self-convincing it took to trust you again? And for what?! To have you stab

me in the heart yet again? You know," she paused to take a breath, " I used to worry about what you'd think of me if I mentioned something that wasn't straight laced, or if I went to a particular place or even if I hung out with particular people," she paused to take another breath.

Gavin took advantage of the momentary silence to try and get himself out of some trouble, "I' m really sorry Evie...I ...I just..."

"Oh save your bullshit Gavin," she threw in his face, "I am sick and tired of hearing your empty apologies and heartless attempts at trying to convince me that you never meant to hurt me. Clearly you could care less since you keep waltzing back into my life only to destroy it."

Gavin opened his mouth, waiting for a spot to jump in, "Can I please say something here?" When all Evie did was glare at him, he hesitantly started to explain himself, "I wasn't trying to two-time you..." he paused, faltering for words, "I thought our little outings were just two friends having a good time together...and...um...besides," he added a bit smugly, "I never thought you would actually think anything remotely serious would come out of this. You know you're not my type. I just figured tha..."

Evie silenced him with one glare, "Just two friends? JUST TWO FRIENDS?! And not your type?! Funny, I didn't know that two friends just having fun ended their 'outings', as you so nicely put it, for the past six months by kissing, especially with someone who supposedly isn't their type."

The red-head spoke up, causing Gavin to jump, "So, you've kissed her more than once, have gone out with her for over six months, and you don't consider yourself dating her? Who do you think you are? And to think I thought you were different from every other two-faced schmuck with a pretty face." Before he could get a word out, or even open his mouth, a red handprint was already showing up on his tan face. "I cannot believe I even thought you were worth dating and fell for your act." With one last look of disgust toward him, she grabbed her purse and left the bar without so much as another glance behind her.

Gavin had barely turned back around to face Evie when a heavy hand clamped down on each shoulder. "Is there a problem here Evie?" one of the bouncers asked; Gavin's face went completely white, "Because if there is, we can take care of it for you."

"Not really Bruce," she replied with a slight smirk while hold-

ing on to the bar for support, "but thanks for asking. I think I can handle this for now; but if I need anything, I'll let you know."

I nodded at both bouncers and they took their hands off of Gavin and took a few steps back before resuming their intimidating stances.

When I didn't say anything for a few minutes, Evie picked up her head, "Hung-over or not, I know that's not the end of the story."

I smirked to myself, "You're right...and I suppose you would like to know what happened?"

"Please?"

"Fine," I said grinning slightly and continued, "so there you stood glaring at Gavin, with most of an entire bar plus two bouncers watching..."

Before either Evie or Gavin could have said another word, I nodded my head at a guy sitting by himself at one of the nearby tables. He stood up, walked over to Gavin and tapped him on the shoulder. When Gavin turned around the man looked at me again, I gave him an affirmative nod, "Are you Gavin?" he asked all too calmly.

Gavin's eyes showed his fear at the sight of this unknown man as he nodded, "Yes...why?"

"Ok, good. I just wanted to make sure I give this to the right guy." Before Gavin could even think to open his mouth to ask anything, a hard clenched fist had already made contact with his jaw.

"What the hel..." Gavin started to ask.

The man took a step back, "That was for misleading and then taking advantage of my girlfriend you prick."

Gavin took a step back and his wide eyes moved from the man's face to Evie's, whose reaction just about matched his,

"Eric?" she asked, a little surprised and quite bewildered, "Why...Wha...What are you doing here?"

Eric turned to face her, "I got out of work late, and I decided to blow off some steam and have a drink or two. When I went to pay my bill, Bernie motioned me over to her and filled me in on what she had seen already tonight, and suggested I stick around for a little bit. Well, I have been watching what's been unfolding and decided to step in and give my friend Gavin here a little present."

Gavin now looked angry, "You didn't tell me you had a boyfriend Evie."

"Funny twist of fate, isn't it?," I taunted from behind the bar,

"It's fine for you to date two people at once, but if someone supposedly happens to two-time you, its all of a sudden not ok anymore?"

Before Gavin and Eric could start their heated exchange of words, and potentially fists, there was a sudden crash.

I practically jumped over the bar just in time to stop Evie from hitting her head on one of the barstool legs and the bottle of rum she had been taking shots out of. All I could make out of Evie's slurred gibberish was, 'He lied to me…he didn't even care…I thought I could trust…he lied…" There was more she was saying, but none of it was intelligible.

When Eric turned to go help pick up Evie, he saw that Gavin was already at my feet, "Get the hell away from my girlfriend," he practically roared. When Gavin didn't move, Eric grabbed him by the back of his light blue polo collar and pulled him up to his feet. "I don't want you to ever touch my girlfriend ever again," he jerked Gavin closer so they were almost nose to nose, "you so much as even look at her again you are going to get a beating so bad you will wish your mother had given birth to a girl instead of boy, because I don't hit girls. DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME?" He shoved Gavin away from him, "Now if you don't have anything else to discuss with me, I'd suggest you leave. I'd rather my girlfriend not see you get your butt kicked; I have a little more respect for her than that."

Gavin took a step back, took one last long look at Evie, now in Eric's arms, and dejectedly walked out the door.

"I'm really sorry to leave you guys when it's so busy in here, but I need to get her home ASAP," I said to one of the other bartenders.

"…and then we walked out the door. Eric carried you to my car and, and I drove the three of us home. When we arrived, he carried you up to our apartment and put you in bed. We decided to take turns sleeping while the other watched you, just to be safe. You had drank more that night than I have ever, in my entire time knowing you, seen you drink." I finished uneasily.

She sat up the rest of the way, "Eric really did all of that for me? But why..."

"Oh Evie," I turned toward her and sighed, "You really don't get it, do you? That's just the tip of the iceberg. Just wait till you see what's waiting for you outside your bedroom door.

End

Growing up Christian

Aimee Huizenga

It was just as I had remembered. Nothing seemed to have changed since my family uprooted and moved to the East coast. The red brick church building had the same sign and same landscaping. The last time I was here it was snowing; today it was a hot August day. I left the comfort of my car and walked closer to the building where my father once worked. As I approached the church, my heart pounded in beat with my footsteps.

When I opened the glass door, I could still smell the roast beef the congregation ate at every church dinner. I could still see the Baxter twins running around in their Sunday best as their mother held her infant daughter. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw the sanctuary. The piano was still in the same corner where it was when Susie and I sang Amazing Grace twenty years ago.

I entered the sanctuary and sat in the last pew. Susie's clear soprano voice could still be heard in the rafters of the church. I could almost hear my alto voice join the song when a deep voice was in my memories. Where did that deep voice fit into our duet? I wondered when suddenly I felt hand on my shoulder. I jumped off the pew like it was on fire.

"You scared me half to death!" I said breathless.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to creep up on you. I am Henry Collins, the pastor of this church. Is there anything I could help you with?" The older man ran his hands through his hair. His eyes looked tired after years of service in the church.

"I'm Olivia James. Actually, my father was the pastor of this church twenty years ago. I grew up here. I wanted to take a look around while I was in town."

"Olivia James, the writer?" I nodded and he continued, "Your father must be proud. I heard a lot of good things about your father. People in this church were very sad when your family left. It took the congregation awhile to warm up to me. Would you like me to give you a tour?

"Thanks, but no. I spent many hours in this building and it is exactly as I remember. The only change is my father's picture is up on the wall with the previous pastors."

Pastor Collins chuckled, "Feel free to walk around. Will you be coming to our Sunday service tomorrow?"

"I'll probably stop by. And thanks for letting me walk around."

We stepped out of the sanctuary and I stopped to look at the youth ministries bulletin board. Pastor Collin's office door closed and I quietly walked up the stairs. I opened the door to my old Sunday school room with Mrs. Sharp. The little orange and blue chairs were still sitting around the half circle table. The closet door had Bible verse posters on it. I walked into the closet and pushed back the Christmas pageant costumes covering the door I knew was there.

The door was begging me to open it. The room beyond the door was my sanctuary. I figured that no one had been past the Christmas costumes in years and most people probably did not even know this door existed. Nothing else in this church has changed I thought to myself. So I pulled out the key I had stolen twenty years ago and slowly stuck it in the rusty lock. The knob turned and the door opened.

Dusty and forgotten described the room. A wooden ladder leaned against the brick wall and I climbed it to my favorite place in this church. A flood of warm, moist air surrounded me as I pushed open the wooden door above my head. From the bell tower I could see the whole city. This was my place, the place I would go to if I was sick of the world. I could still remember the rainy June day that my father said writing was not a practical career. I could almost hear his voice.

"One in a million writers actually sell books and make enough money to live on, Olivia. You should pick something more practical," my father preached at me.

"Where did you get those facts, Dad?" I retorted.

"Don't get smart with me Olivia. I'm trying to do what is best for you. God does not want you to waste your life on something as frivolous as writing. You're a bright girl; you can do anything."

Except be a writer I thought to myself. I didn't have the guts to say it out loud. The oversized leather chair I was sitting in seemed to be trapping me. My insides started to churn and I thought I would be sick.

"Okay Dad. See you at home." Before he could say anything else, I rushed out the door. Our house was right across the street from the church, but I didn't go home. I went up to the bell tower to clear my head. I saw my dreams shatter like pieces of

broken glass. As the rain fell on the ground below, tears fell on my cheeks.

Twenty years later, the sky was clear and my dreams had been repaired. My father was probably proud of himself for talking some sense into me that day. However, his disapproval made me try harder. I wrote story after story and poem after poem. I spent hours in the library reading works of other great authors. The library could be seen from the bell tower. I spent hours in that building reading...

The library was where I went to escape the heat of summer. As I was reading The Bell Jar, I could feel someone's eyes on me. I wasn't sure if I really felt it or if I was going crazy like Esther from The Bell Jar. I looked up just in time to see Patrick drop his head quickly. His face turned beet red and I knew it was him. Smiling to myself, I returned to my book.

Again Patrick interrupted me, but this time he came over and said, "Hey, Olivia. I was wondering if maybe you'd...uh...like to maybe go to dinner sometime. We could go anywhere you'd like. Maybe Friday night? I know its Tuesday and you may have plans, but I was hoping..."

"I'd love to go to dinner on Friday night. How about Lily's Garden?

Patrick looked relieved and replied, "That would be great. Should I pick you up at seven?"

"I'll be ready." Patrick grinned and left the library. My concentration for The Bell Jar had left too. I could only think about how my father would handle my date on Friday night.

At 7:10 p.m., Patrick and I were on our way to Lily's Garden. When Patrick came to pick me up, my father was waiting by the front door. My father began drilling him and I felt like I was trapped in a cage that was getting smaller and smaller with each minute. After the interrogation, we finally escaped with an eleven o'clock curfew.

"Sorry about my dad. He can be a little crazy," I apologized.

"It's okay. I bet most dads are like that. Talking with your dad was a breeze; the hard part was asking you out."

"Well, I'm glad you did."

Dinner went smoothly. I had imagined the worst for dinner. I imagined I would spill on my dress or my parents would ambush us at the restaurant. I thought we might have nothing to talk about,

but there were no lulls in the conversation. We talked about how excited we were about college and how we didn't want to go back to high school. I found myself telling him I wanted to be a writer.

"I can't believe I just told you that. The only other person who knows that is my dad and he did not respond to it too well."

"You'd be an amazing writer. Why doesn't he believe in you?" Patrick questioned.

"He's says it isn't a practical career. 'Only one in millions make it' to quote him. I feel trapped by him and his religion. Shouldn't a God who created writing want His people to be writers, even if it is not practical? Not everything Jesus did was practical. How can I make him understand that?"

"Maybe he doesn't have to understand. Just do it because you love it. It doesn't matter what he thinks."

Patrick was the first person to believe in me. As I stood in the bell tower as an adult, I missed Patrick, my high school love. On New Years Day 1988, I decided to tell my father that I was going to be a writer no matter what he said or wanted. Patrick stood beside me. I can still hear my father yelling.

"He's the one who is filling your head with silly dreams!" He pointed at Patrick dramatically. "I knew that this boy was a bad influence on you. You are meant to do great things and how can you when he is telling you to run off with him and be a writer. That is a sin, Olivia."

"What is a sin, Dad? Running off with Patrick or writing? Because the last time I checked, God wrote the Bible. Didn't He? You are just trapped by an old fashion way of thinking and you want me to remain trapped with you."

"Don't get smart with me young lady." That is what he always seemed to say when he knew I was right. I couldn't stay another second with my father so I grabbed my coat and ran outside. Patrick followed me to the church and up the stairs and through the forgotten door and up the ladder to the bell tower. When I was up in the bell tower, away from the judging eyes of my father, I started to cry.

Patrick sat down next to me and whispered, "Its okay, Olivia."

"No it's not okay! Fathers should believe in their daughters, not crush their dreams. I'm going to be a writer to prove him wrong."

"No, you are going to be a writer because you love words and putting them together. You are going to do great things."

A week later, my parent told me that we would be moving.

My father had taken a call to a church in Maine. We were going to leave after my first semester of my senior year in high school was over. My father said he felt God calling him to Maine, but I knew it was because of me. I also knew there was no fighting my parents.

The move to Maine did not change my dreams. I was sad and lonely, but even without Patrick I still wanted to be a writer.

Now I know that my dreams did come true, and in the bell tower of this old brick church, I know that I am free. Twenty years after the day I told my father I wanted to be a writer, I can look over the town I grew up in and know I am that "one in a million."

End

Suddenly, Bananas

Mark Farner

"Wake up, Jackie! We've been robbed!"

Jackie rolled out of bed for the third time that week, falling flat on the floor.

"Damnit!" She shrieked.

She glanced up at the alarm clock, 10:31AM. At first she thought she was two hours late for work at the coffee shop a few blocks down the street, but soon realized it was Saturday morning. She didn't have anything to do today and neither did her boyfriend. Speaking of which, a laugh came floating in from the living room of the apartment.

"I know that sound," Laughed Vince. "You banged your head again, didn't you?"

"Shut up, Vince," Jackie called back, getting up from the carpeted floor. She stumbled over a pile of magazines.

"We're gonna need a load of towels."

"Towels?" Jackie slipped into a black t-shirt and khaki pants. She put on her plain silver watch. "I just washed a load of em yesterday."

"No," Vince began. "I mean we're going to need to use them all."

"On what?"

"You'll see."

Jackie sighed. She sat on the edge of her bed and began putting on her socks. Right first, then left. She tugged the tips of them to give her toes some room to breathe, and then walked out of the small bedroom. It was one bedroom of the apartment that she, Jackie Travis Kate, shared with her boyfriend, Vince Cross. When they first met, Vince had asked her once what kind of name that was.

"I never had any use for the name my folks gave me," she shrugged, taking a sip of her soft drink.

Vince gave a chuckle. He loved her from the beginning. They dated for a long time after that. Finally working up the nerve, he asked if she'd give up the last name Kate when they got married. Jackie laughed almost too hard, causing Vince to blush. She reassured him she'd take his last name some day, but then she'd be known

as Jackie Travis Kate Cross. People would then have to refer to her as either Jackie Travis or Kate Cross.

"What the hell, Vince?!" Jackie yelled as she stepped into the small kitchen area. The fridge door was wide open, as well as the apartment door. Soda bottles, strawberry jelly, pickles, a box of baking soda, packages of individually wrapped cheese, and a wealth of other assorted foodstuffs lay on the kitchen floor. A gigantic puddle of blended drinks formed a veritable lake, fed by canals in the tile, which washed up on the carpeted shores of the living room. She poured herself a cup of coffee, black. Trying to navigate back, she stepped into a patch of carpet that was soggy with water.

"Oh, that's great," She said, pulling off the soaked footwear. "I just put these on."

"I tried to warn you," Vince said. He sat on the sofa in his boxers and a white t-shirt, his bare feet on the coffee table. He was clipping his toenails. "Didn't I?"

"Actually, you didn't," replied Jackie. She cringed when he saw Vince's toenails being clipped. The way he used the clippers caused the nails to dart across the room. "I told you about that before!"

"Calm down." Vince waved at Jackie in a dismissing motion. "I'll clean them up when I'm finished."

Jackie replaced her socks and put on her tennis shoes. He walked back into the living room.

"That's not the point. It's just unhygienic and–"

A toenail flew into her coffee cup, making a miniature splash. She had just made it the way she liked it too. Vince saw what had happened and began laughing so hard he couldn't clip his toenails. Jackie gave an audible grunt and threw the coffee cup in the sink, almost breaking it.

"Easy there, honey," Vince eyes went wide. He pulled his feet off the coffee table and put them on the sofa. "Don't do anything rash."

Jackie looked like she was going to tackle Vince so he dropped the nail clippers and shielded himself. However, Jackie wasn't going for him. She snagged the clippers off the sofa.

"Hey, I need those," Vince protested.

"Go get em." Jackie said, and threw them at the wall behind the television.

There was no resulting thud. They both blinked. Vince got

up off the sofa and stood next to Jackie.

"Did you hear a–" Vince started.

"No." Jackie replied.

"Where did it go?"

"Behind the television I imagine."

They looked at each other, and then proceeded across the living room. Jackie stepped around the coffee table. Vince pulled back the table that the television rested on up to the sofa. He then began searching the dull green carpet behind it. Nothing. Jackie took the other side, searching as well.

"That's the weirdest thing," Vince said. "Up and vanished. Maybe you threw it out the window?"

"No. You and I both saw it fly over here. I just don't understand it."

Vince rested up against the wall, placing his hand on it. Least, he tried to. Before their astounded eyes, his hand vanished and he nearly fell over, but Jackie caught him just in time. His entire right arm was nowhere to be seen.

"Uhh… Jackie?"

"Yeah, Vince."

"What the hell's going on?"

"I wish I knew. How's your arm?"

"It's… it's fine, actually. Feels even better than before except it's… cold…"

"Cold?"

"Yeah… slightly chilled."

"Weird."

Jackie pulled him out and his arm reappeared with ease. The wall was bare save for a few photos. There was the graduation photo they shared. They had huge smiles beneath their blue mortarboards. There was the photo of them moving into the apartment. Jackie took it while Vince carried the suitcases. There were dozens of photos like this and more in photo albums throughout the apartment.

"Why didn't you notice this sooner?" Jackie asked.

"Too concerned with the fridge, I guess," Vince replied. "Think it's been here since this morning?"

"I can't say," Jackie whispered. An idea popped into her head. She pulled the pool cue that was lying against the sofa.

"That's my lucky cue," Vince whined.

"Relax," Jackie reassured him. "I'm just testing something."

She began poking the wall around where Vince's arm had gone through. In several areas the tip disappeared, but in other areas it did not. Before long, she determined the vanishing area was about the size of a hula hoop. She leaned up against the wall where it was safe and stuck out her hand.

"Now that's interesting." Jackie said.

"What's that?"

"The wall behind this... this 'portal'. It isn't in the wall. It's about 5 inches off the wall."

She pulled down the photo of their graduation and handed it to Vince.

"See?" Jackie asked. "It's floating in thin air, like a ring suspended from wires. Instead of going through the ring, it doesn't take you out the other side, but somewhere else entirely."

"Too wild," Vince said. "Where do you think it goes to?"

"No clue. You said your arm was fine, just a little cold, so I assume it's not anywhere dangerous, at least not in the immediate sense."

Vince felt his arm, as if to assure himself it was still there.

"I can't believe it," Vince started.

"What?" Asked Jackie, feeling the end of the pool cue that had traversed the portal.

"We have, like, our own black hole to nowhere," Vince paused, then took off into his room and, after some rummaging, returned with a basket of trash.

"Hey," Jackie went to grab at the basket. "Don't you put th–"

Vince dumped all of its contents inside the black hole. Crumbled up papers, candy wrappers, Popsicle sticks, and some soiled q-tips vanished into oblivion.

"Think of it, Jackie," Vince laughed. "The money we'll save on garbage bags and trips to the dump!"

"You have got to be the dumbest person I have ever been associated with."

"Let's see if you're still saying that after I dump all your trash in too." Grinning, Vince ran into Jackie's room.

"I'm certain I will be... Vince, so help me, if you don't stop and give some thought to this."

"Okay, fine." Already tilting the trash can to the portal, Vince set it down. "What's on your mind, Jackie?"

"Hear me out," Jackie sat down on the couch and put her fore-

head in her palm. "For all you know, this may be a portal to another dimension, another world with sentient life forms greater than our wildest imaginings or just about equivalent to us. Now, let's say this is the first contact the other world has had with other Interdimensional life. First, they're either going insane over the fact your arm appeared out of nothing and, for all we know, slapped one of them in the face or copped a feel of some alien boob. They're still running around in an ecstatic and, likely, panicked state from the sheer impact of this discovery."

"Yeah. I'm not following you, but go on."

"So there they are, probably saying to themselves, 'Oh my... oh my culture's generic diety of worship! We're not alone. There's other life in the universe. Who knows what we can teach from each other? Who knows what technology we can share? Who knows–' and then POW, you start dumping trash into their damn universe. You're like some Interdimensional garbage man just... just making his rounds; Vince the 'Hello, aliens. I'll just dump my shit all over your world, hope you don't mind.' Garbage Man."

"I see what you're saying, Jackie."

"Wait, you do?"

"Yeah... we must give them a peace offering."

"That's what I was saying?" Jackie tilted her head to the side. "That doesn't sound like what I was saying!"

"It's all good," Vince began rummaging in the kitchen. "I got it."

When he returned he carried a banana with a pair of metal tongs. A confident look on his face made it seem as if he had discovered the cure to cancer. Jackie, on the other hand, thought he looked like a stupid kid running with an open tackle box, about to get a face full of hooks.

"You can't just put that in the portal, Vince."

"Hey, you're right," Vince replied as he began peeling the banana. e dropped the peel on the floor.

"Vince!"

"Relax, Jackie. We'll dump the peel in the portal later."

"For the love of God, then what is the point of the peace offering?!"

"Maybe they're hungry?"

Vince stuck the banana into the portal and began wiggling the tongs, half of which vanished into thin air.

"C'mon, aliens. Take the tasty banana."

"I hate you."

"Nummy, nummy banana!"

"Vince, so help me, you give me those tongs."

Jackie grabbed Vince's arm and pulled, freeing the tongs and banana from the portal.

"Damnit, Jackie. Look what you di–" Vince groaned with annoyance, but suddenly stopped when he looked at the banana. Jackie was looking at it too. Before them, held between the tongs, was the banana. Completely restored, it looked to have never been peeled. Almost as if uncertain, Jackie picked up the peel that Vince had left on the floor.

"It's not just a portal, Vince. It's... it's like..."

"It's a medical breakthrough. Jackie, it can restore things. It might even cure diseases. This thing could be take us years, hell, decades, no. No. What am I saying? Jackie, if all wounds can be healed, it'd be the end of medicine as we know it."

"We have to call someone," Jackie suggested.

"Who? The police?" Vince dropped the banana and tongs on the floor, unconcerned.

"I don't know, maybe the Center for Disease Control."

"And then what?"

"I... I..."

"Well, what?!"

"Damnit. Give me a minute. This is a lot to digest."

"Don't you understand? We could own this. We'd be rich beyond our wildest dreams."

"Rich? How can you claim to own a hole in reality?"

"It's our hole in reality. It's in our apartment. We could charge admission."

"You're getting ahead of yourself here."

"Am I? Think of it. We could charge millions per visit and people would pay it."

"We're doing okay."

"But we could do better..."

"What would we do with millions of dollars, Vince?

"It's not what we would do. It's a matter of what we could do. We could do anything we wanted."

"Money doesn't buy everything."

"No. Just the world, and that's close enough."

"We're still not entirely sure what it does. You only tried one banana."

"You're right. You're absolutely right, baby. It's time to move up."

Vince went into the kitchen and returned with a butcher knife. He began lining it up with his wrist.

"No. No. No. No. No. Vince. Vince! Think this through!"

"Just one chop, Jackie. I'll put the stump in and it'll be restored."

"Don't go 0 to 60 like that. Jesus. Here, let me try it an easier way."

She took the knife and poked him in the finger, only enough to draw blood.

"Damnit, that hurt!"

"You were ready to chop your hand off and you're complaining about a simple poke?"

She guided his hand into the portal. Withdrawing it revealed the gash completely restored.

"It works," She whispered.

"Rich... rich..." Vince headed for the front door.

"Wait, where are you going?"

"The patent office."

"You idiot. You cannot patent something you didn't invent."

"Well, you have a better idea?"

"Actually. I think we should wait awhile. It might change. It wasn't here yesterday. It may not be here tomorrow."

"What are you saying?"

"I'm saying we have no basis of understanding besides poking and prodding out. It could disappear any minute."

"Why would you say something like that? Don't you realize it's the answer to our prayers?"

"Prayers? Vince, it's just a–"

"How could you be so spiteful? Why would you wish it gone?"

"Vince, I'm not–"

"That's what you want, isn't it? Without this miracle, we'd be back to our mundane, worthless lives and that's what makes you content?"

"Listen, I–"

"You treacherous bitch!"

"What?!"

"You love this misery and, like they say, misery loves com-

pany."

"Where are you getting this? I'm just saying it can be taken away from us at any minute."

"And you'd take it wouldn't you."

"You're not making any sense."

"I'm making perfect sense!"

Vince picked the butcher knife up off the coffee table.

"I'll end you, Jackie."

With nothing else in sight, she picked up the pool cue and prepared to swing it.

"Don't you touch me!"

"I'm not going to touch you. This knife is."

"Stay back!"

"It'll touch you again and again and again."

"Stop it!"

"Then I'll put you in the portal."

"You're insane!"

"And you'll see things my way."

She looked at his hand that gripped the knife. The finger that had been restored was bleeding.

"Vince, your hand."

"What?"

"Your han-"

He dropped the knife, fell to his knees, and began screaming. From his finger to his shoulder began to form gashes. As if stabbed repeatedly by some invisible force, he collapsed to the ground.

"Jackie," Vince shrieked. "Help me!"

She walked over to help him, but a pair of toenail clippers suddenly whipped across the room, cutting her cheek. She looked over at the fridge. It was firing nail clippers in random directions and random speeds. Some darted across the room with such force they knocked pictures off the wall. Jackie hit the carpet, trying to avoid the projectiles. She crawled over to Vince. He was whimpering.

"Vince," She sobbed, tears welling in her eyes.

"Jackie, I'm sorry about that," He looked at her, ever more gashes forming in his face. "I wasn't myself. I felt I was watching myself and couldn't stop it."

Trash was spewing out of the fridge. The crumbled up papers, candy wrappers, Popsicle sticks, and soiled q-tips re-emerged, over and over again. They accumulated on the floor, birthing a mountain

of garbage.

"Oh God, Vince…"

"Y-y-you just poked me once, b-b-but it's, it's as if it's happening for the first time, e-e-every time."

"What are you saying?"

"E-e-everything that has gone into the portal is coming out of the fridge, but it was delayed. The portal's a hole in time, but…"

Suddenly, bananas. Thousands of them. The scene would have been somewhat comical if not for the fact they wouldn't stop. They sprinkled the garbage pile, giving it a white polka dot appearance.

"The portal didn't restore my finger. It-it-it took the wound away… and gave it back, a hundredfold. Destroy it, Jackie, before it's too late."

"But how?"

Dozens of identical tips of pool cues littered the floor.

"C-c-cross over, Jackie. Cross over and s-s-stop it."

"Vince…"

"You're still so beautiful. As b-b-beautiful as the day we met. If I could only touch your face…"

Vince raised his arm. There was nothing left of his hand anymore. Like a puzzle being pulled apart, it was becoming less and less tangible.

"Hurry, b-b-before there's n-n-nothing left... of us…"

Jackie began crawling through the apartment, staying low to avoid the constant stream of nail clippers. She swam through the garbage, navigating pool cues and bananas. She finally reached the portal. Garbage piled up to her elbows.

"Jackie!" Vince yelled.

"Yes?" She said, not looking back.

"It's happened before…"

"What?"

"It's… happened…"

Vince became motionless. Jackie squelched a sob, moved towards the portal, and dove into the abyss as the garbage, bananas, and nail clippers from the kitchen began to flood the living room. The piling, recycled matter grew dense, the carpet vanished, and there seemed to be no end.

What then greeted Jackie was pain as she banged against a door. She pushed it open and fell out of the confined box she seemed to inhabit. With her arms and legs, she knocked an assortment of items

onto the floor. Soda bottles spilled open. Jars of strawberry jelly broke. A box of baking soda fell over and bubbled. Packages of individually wrapped cheese fell out. Gasping, she realized where she was. It was the floor of their kitchen.

She was thirsty, thirstier than she'd ever been. She grabbed a bottle of water and began chugging it. Frantic, she rose to her feet and nearly slipped. When she walked out of the kitchen and into the living room, the bottle of water fell out of her hand and soaked the carpet. The living room was free of all the garbage. She then looked at the clock on the wall and understood why. The time was 10:30 AM.

Who the hell is that?!" Vince yelled from the bedroom.

Horrified, covered in an array of trash, and drenched in tears, the realization was too much for her. Jackie lunged for the door, unlocked it, opened it, and fled into the hallway.

Vince walked into the living room, prepared to attack the burglar with his pool cue. When he saw no one, he set it against the sofa. Staring at the open door and the horrible mess in the small kitchen area, he yelled.

"Wake up, Jackie! We've been robbed!"

Jackie rolled out of bed for the third time that week, falling flat on the floor.

End

Confession

Sarah Grabarzyk

Despite the fact that he'd decided to stay in his dorm and rest that evening, Christopher found himself quickly getting dressed and ready to go out. Of course, he was already wearing clothes, but he just didn't like the way that particular outfit fell on him. Chris tried to justify that by telling himself it was about how he felt wearing those clothes, not about who he was going to meet.

Just moments earlier, Chris was on the phone with his best friend, Gabe. They had planned to meet up in the lounge located inside the college's main building, and then figure out what to do from there. Chris wasn't sure at all what he wanted to do. All he knew was that he wanted to see Gabe. In order to prove to himself that he didn't, after all, have feelings for his best friend, perhaps all Chris had to do was see him again.

Ready to leave his room and meet up with Gabe, Chris had to practically force himself to stand in front of his mirror to make sure he looked decent. He only took a quick glance at his image and decided he looked just fine. Chris grabbed his wallet and his room key, then quickly left his dorm.

As he made his way to the destined meeting place, Chris couldn't help but feel eager to get there as soon as possible. That was only because walking by himself was no fun at all, he tried to convince himself, and it didn't have a thing to do with the fact that he was going to see Gabe. At the thought of his best friend, Chris almost instantly felt a strange tightness in his chest.

That feeling was something he wasn't going to even bother making an excuse for. Chris was done making excuses to himself, because it seemed that every time he did that, he started to doubt his sexuality more and more. For the rest of his walk, which wasn't very long, he was just going to ignore any of those silly thoughts. Once he saw Gabe, Chris figured he could put an end to his internal conflict. He'd see that he really didn't think of Gabe as anything more than simply his best friend.

Before he knew it, Chris had arrived at his destination. He stepped inside the building, trying to ignore the butterflies fluttering around inside his gut as he stepped closer to the lounge. Gabe's dorm was a bit closer to the lounge than Chris', so he was certain

that his best friend would be there first. At least he wouldn't have to suffer through waiting anxiously in the lounge.

As he stepped inside the lounge, Chris almost instantly spotted Gabe. He wasn't aware of the stupid-looking grin that spread across his face as he briskly stepped forward, greeting his best friend with a wave. Before he could speak up, another voice suddenly cut him off.

"Hello, Chris!" the shrill, squeaky voice piped.

Chris instantly froze, averting his eyes to the seat next to Gabe. It was Darcy! He hadn't even noticed she was there until she said something! Chris felt a bit stupid, to think that Gabe would be showing up alone. Those two were practically attached at the hip.

"Hey, Darcy," Chris replied, trying not to sound too apathetic. He gave her a quick, fake smile while taking a seat across from the couple.

"So, what's going on, man?" Gabe asked, putting an arm around Darcy's shoulders. "I thought you were planning on staying in for the rest of the day."

"I guess I just got bored," Chris shrugged, lowering his eyes to his lap. It wasn't like Gabe and his girlfriend were all over each other, but their public display of affection still made Chris uncomfortable.

Still, Chris brought himself to look up at the couple and became unable to take his eyes off that arm that was around Darcy's shoulders. Gabe wasn't particularly athletic, but he did stay healthy, and his arm had a nice shape to it. He wore a T-shirt, so it was a bit difficult for Chris not to notice the curve of the other young man's bicep that wasn't fully covered by the sleeve. Chris started to space out, wondering what it would be like to be in Darcy's position with that arm around him.

Gabe's voice interrupted Chris' daydream. "So hey, are we going to just sit here staring off into space or what?"

Snapping back to reality, Chris could feel the temperature in his cheeks increasing. He hoped he wasn't blushing, because that would just seem really, really awkward. His brain quickly scrambled for a reply. "Well, we can play video games or something," Chris suggested.

Before Gabe could give his own opinion, Darcy scrunched her nose, making a face as if she smelled something terrible. "Video games? That is, like, so boring!" she scoffed.

Chris really wanted to reply to that, telling her that he hadn't even invited her to come along, let alone asked her opinion, but his manners and common sense told him to hold his tongue. Still, he couldn't prevent the angry glare he directed towards her. "Okay, then, if you're so bored then what do you suggest we do?" Chris didn't mean to sound so snappy, but there was a limit to how much he could mask his irritation.

"We can, um, like, go shopping or something!" she said in an excited tone, as if two boys would share the same enthusiasm.

Gabe turned to Chris, as if he were about to agree with his girlfriend and see what his best friend thought of that idea. Chris knew that's what Gabe was about to do. He was just so head-over-heels for Darcy, he'd do whatever that girl wanted to do. Whether it was the fact that he was whipped by her or simply wanted her to be happy, Chris felt neither of these, so he had no problem speaking up before Gabe could open his mouth.

"No, I'm low on cash," he quickly said. "Besides, there's not anything I need to buy right now."

Acting like a spoiled child, Darcy, folded her arms across her chest, giving Gabe an over-exaggerated pout. Gabe sighed, passing an exasperated look on to Chris. Oh, yes. He was whipped.

"Hey, man, anything's better than just sitting here doing nothing," Gabe said, trying to back up Darcy.

"I don't want to go shopping," Chris said sternly, determined not to let that annoying girl get her way.

It really disappointed Chris that Gabe would side with Darcy instead of his own best friend. What upset him most was that he was positive that Gabe would much rather play video games instead of going shopping with Darcy. Chris made the mistake of going with them once, and it was a miserable experience, involving Darcy having the time of her life while the two men carried the bags.

"Well, what do you want to do, then?" Gabe asked.

Chris had already told them what he wanted to do, but "Little Miss Perfect" already shot down that idea. Then there was something else that he wanted to do with Gabe, which he definitely could absolutely not, under any circumstances, ever tell anybody. However, once that thought entered his mind, his imagination drifted off to picture such things in more detail. The fact that Gabe was sitting right there in front of him didn't help at all, and actually made it easier to picture him in those daydreams.

This was entirely the opposite of what Chris had expected to happen. These thoughts were supposed to go away, not get worse! However, the way things turned out, Chris could no longer deny his attraction to Gabe. He could feel the blood draining from his face, and it felt as if his intestines were rearranging themselves. This was wrong; it shouldn't have ever happened, but here Chris was, no longer able to deny that he wanted to be more than friends with Gabe.

"Chris? Are you okay?" Gabe asked, raising an eyebrow.

The spaced-out young man jumped, startled by the sound of his best friend's voice. "What?!" he exclaimed, as if he were caught in the middle of some sort of shameful act.

"You're kinda spacing out, man," Gabe explained. "Maybe you do need that night of rest like you were originally planning."

So, Gabe thought that Chris was only feeling ill. That was good, that Chris was still able to keep all of this a secret. Before things got worse, he figured it probably would be a great idea to just hurry up and get back to his dorm before he started acting like a flustered school girl with a crush, letting on to his feelings.

"Yeah, I think you're right," he sighed. "I don't know. I just—I really should get some rest, I think." Chris stood from his seat, ready to leave. "I'll just catch ya later, 'kay?"

"Yeah, see ya," Gabe said, givng a wave. "I hope you're not sick or anything. Be sure to rest up!"

The concern Gabe showed for his best friend brought a genuine smile to Chris' face. He returned Gabe's wave, then also reluctantly waved goodbye to Darcy, to be polite, and then made his way back to his dorm.

Well, that trip was for nothing but a huge disappointment. Not only did things go completely wrong, Chris didn't even get to spend as much time as he wanted alone with his best friend. This was all just too confusing for Chris. He wasn't gay! But there he was, totally unable to deny those feelings he had for Gabe. Of course, back in high school, they both had their share of girlfriends, but no relationship was as serious as the one Gabe seemed to have with Darcy. The seriousness of that relationship definitely started to get Chris noticing his feelings for Gabe, and the fact that he'd successfully distracted himself with girls during high school was what caused him to take so long to notice that he did, in fact, have interest in men.

When he got back to his dorm, Chris instantly kicked off his shoes and crawled into his bed. It wasn't very late at all, but Chris didn't really feel like doing anything at all. These feelings that he had for Gabe could ruin everything – not just their friendship, but his whole life as well. If anybody ever found this out, Chris figured it would completely change the way everybody saw him. It was going to be very difficult, but Chris resolved to keep everything a secret, and never let anybody ever know.

The days that followed, it became increasingly hard to act naturally around Gabe. Chris was certain that his best friend had noticed something different, so it was only a matter of time before Gabe figured things out. Chris started to avoid Gabe, feeling more and more like he wanted to confess each time he saw the other young man, but he still was determined to keep this all a secret.

Finally, the day came where this secret was just too much of a burden for Chris to carry. Holding his feelings inside proved to only make things harder on himself, and besides, if Gabe truly were his best friend, this bit of news shouldn't affect their friendship. However, he was still so afraid that his confession would bring an end to their friendship. Then again, Chris didn't really need friends like that. That's right, he convinced himself, if such a trivial little fact made Gabe think less of him, then he should find a better friend. After working up the courage, he picked up his phone and called Gabe.

"Hey, man, what's up?" Gabe answered, recognizing Chris' number on his cell phone's caller ID.

"Hi!" Chris automatically replied. He opened his mouth to say something else, but realized he hadn't exactly planned what to say to Gabe.

"Um, did you need something?" Gabe asked after a long enough pause.

"Oh, yeah, sorry!" Chris was already starting to feel stupid. "I was just curious if you had plans with Darcy tonight."

"Yeah, we're out right now," he replied.

"When aren't you doing something with Darcy?"

"Whoa, whoa, Chris! I know you don't like her all that much, but—"

Chris hadn't meant to sound insulting like that, so he quickly cut off Gabe to let him know that he was honestly asking a genuine question, wondering when he could hang out with Gabe alone, with-

out that girl following around like a sick puppy-dog.

"Actually, we haven't made any plans for tomorrow night yet," Gabe answered, once Chris clarified.

"Great," Chris said with a big sigh of relief. The sooner, the better, he figured. "I just need one evening to hang out with her around." As he said that last sentence, his face turned red. Thankfully, he was alone in his dorm with no one to see.

Gabe sounded slightly confused at that, but the only way to remedy that confusion would be to agree to meeting with Chris. The two scheduled a time to meet each other at a Bennigan's that wasn't far from campus. Chris was worried that the two of them going out for dinner alone like that might seem too much like a date, but it was Gabe's suggestion; he claimed to have a terrible craving for the potato soup they served at Bennigan's.

The entire rest of the evening and the following day, Chris could not ignore the incredible anxious feeling that only got worse as the evening of their scheduled meeting drew near. On the actual day, Chris spent most of the afternoon preparing. Every possible scenario, or at least what felt like every scenario, went through his mind. He rehearsed the evening over and over, sure that nothing could possibly go wrong. Chris' favorite outfit was picked out, but not put on until an hour before Chris planned to leave, just to be sure the clothes still looked fresh when he met with Gabe. He also spent quite a long time in front of the mirror, deciding what hairstyle looked best on him.

Still, after all that, Chris was ready earlier than he'd planned. The butterflies furiously fluttering around in his stomach were too agitating for him to simply sit in his room and wait, so he decided to leave early and get them a table, and maybe he'd order an appetizer as well, to have everything ready for Gabe once he arrived. Chris tried to take his time walking to the restaurant, but he had too much adrenaline pumping through him to walk at as leisurely a pace as he'd have liked.

Once he arrived at the restaurant, he hardly had to wait to get a seat, and then proceeded to order a Sierra Mist. Chris was generally a Pepsi person, but he recognized that he absolutely did not need a caffeinated drink at the time. Then he started to wonder what sort of appetizer to order while waiting, but Gabe arrived sooner than Chris had expected.

They greeted each other, as normally as Chris could manage,

and Gabe took a seat across from his best friend. The waiter came, took the newcomer's drink order, and left the two alone. Now that Gabe was there, all of Chris' confidence seemed to suddenly vanish, and he couldn't bring himself to look his best friend in the eye. He started to feel slightly nauseous, hardly able to believe that he had actually thought this was a good idea. But here they were, face-to-face, meeting with the sole purpose for Chris to confess. He had come this far; he couldn't back down now.

"So, what's this all about?" Gabe asked, eager to know what was so special about this meeting that he couldn't bring Darcy. Chris was actually quite surprised that Gabe had actually managed to detach her for one evening.

"Ah, nothing all that important," Chris replied, trying to make himself feel better, but as soon as the words left his mouth, he realized how stupid that sounded. Gabe raised an eyebrow at his best friend, not believing for one second that this wasn't important.

"I mean, yeah, there was just something I wanted to talk about," Chris slowly corrected himself, letting out a shaky breath.

"I'm all ears!" Gabe said with a friendly smile on his face, eagerly leaning forward to hear what his best friend had to say.

It took just a moment's hesitation for Chris to become distracted by that smile. He forced himself to raise his eyes to look at Gabe, mind quickly searching for a proper response, but his mind went off-track as he inevitably admired that irresistible smile. However, Gabe's smile didn't last. Once the silence lasted for too long, the smile slowly faded and was replaced with a look of slight irritation. With nothing to be distracted by any longer, Chris snapped out of it.

"Ah, sorry! It's just..." he trailed off with a sigh. "I'm just not really sure what to say." All that preparing and rehearsing for this moment apparently was for nothing. Chris had felt so sure that he was fully prepared for this, but now all that preparation had completely escaped his mind.

"Well, whatever it is, don't worry about it too much," Gabe said nonchalantly. "We're best friends, you know?"

Gabe made that sound infinitely easier than it really was. If only Chris felt the same way, he could have spat the confession out by now, and they could happily be enjoying their dinner, talking about how nothing in their friendship has changed. At least, that's what Chris wanted to think. However, he wasn't that naïve. He

knew things couldn't turn out that way. This meeting was one big mistake.

"Gabe, I know I don't seem to get along with Darcy all that much, and I'm really sorry about that," Chris began nervously. His hands sat on his lap, and he fidgeted anxiously beneath the table. "But honestly..." He paused, making absolute sure that his next sentence was going to be something he wouldn't regret.

Taking a deep breath, Chris continued, "I... I'm happy for you two. I'm really sorry if I've been a jerk at all." Finishing his sentence, he hung his head.

"That's it?" Gabe said incredulously. "You didn't have to get so worked up over that! It's cool, man!"

The moment of truth having passed, Chris' nerves had completely gone, and he let out a large breath of relief. However, in a way, he felt somewhat worse than he did before. Chris was thoroughly disappointed with himself and his inability to go through with this. He saw himself as a coward, but that was better than having his best friend, and possibly his parents as well, disowning him, right?

At least for now, this was the way things would have to be. They both ordered their dinners and had a pleasant lunch together. There was that chance that things could have turned out much differently if Chris had confessed his feelings to Gabe. Maybe sometime in the distant future, Chris might find the courage to tell his best friend this secret he'd been keeping. For now, it looked as if he would just have to be satisfied with a simple, friendly evening at Bennigan's.

End

Miles

Alica Fernatt

Cryin' ain't gonna bring her back. I don't know why her momma has to cry out like that. Shoot. As loud as she is, Keyshia can probably hear her momma all the way up in heaven. I know that's where she is. That's why I ain't cryin. It ain't her lyin' there anyway. It's just a body. The baby isn't even cryin. She knows it's useless to cry too. Baby's gonna be smart, just her momma. She got my eyes though.

***

"Son, get that door."

"Yes ma'am." Damn. I put down my controller and loosen up my tie. I hate wearing ties. Momma don't understand how I can come home from a funeral and go straight to my games. What else am I gonna do? I said goodbye to Keyshia. I have my own way. The doorbell rings again impatiently.

"Son!"

"Ma'am!" I open the door. Keyshia's momma is standing there with the baby. I give her a hug because it seems like the right thing to do. Something isn't right and she pulls away strangely.

"Look, your momma around?" I don't even have to yell for her. I hear the heavy footsteps in the hallway. Momma can hear a mouse whispering a block a way. Nothin' gets by her. She nods for me to get lost. I can't wait to get out of these clothes anyway. I think there might be a pickup basketball game down at the park. It's been a minute since I've been able to play. Momma thought it wouldn't be right for me to leave the hospital to go play. She was probably right.

I can hear them talking from my room. Strange. Momma usually has this quiet way of talking to folks. She reserves her real voice for me. Never have to ask her to repeat things when she's talking to me.

I look through my closet trying to find the new shoes Momma gave me for my good grades. I can't wait to see what she gets me for my graduation man. This is going to be my year. Coach says scouts from all kinds of schools are buzzin' about me. I bet

there won't be one game without a scout sitting in the stands to see what I can do. And man, they ain't seen nothing like me. Just watch, I'll pay Momma back all the shoes and games she bought me. Shoot, when I go pro, she'll never have to work again. I'll be buying her shoes then.

There they are. Damn, how did I get these shoes so messed up already? I have to find myself a job. My boy has himself a nice little job at the supermarket, carrying groceries for people and stuff. I bet he could help me out with a job there. He's always got all kinds of girls lined up for him too, just because he's got a job. A little income and I'll have my choice of any of the senior girls I bet. I know they see me now. With a little cash in my pocket, I bet there won't be a night when I'm not busy! Maybe even put a little money aside for a car.

A car...Keyshia was always on me about getting my license. She got tired of walking everywhere with me real quick. I can't help but smile. We had some good times. She was the best. Even Momma thought so, and she ain't easy to win over. I feel a little flutter in my chest. Alright man, cut that out. You said goodbye.

"Son!"

"Yes Ma'am." She wants me to come to her. I finish up lacing up my ball shoes. Man, I can't wait to play. I have some pent up basketball energy in me. Those poor guys on the court won't even know what hit them. I come into the living room and Momma is standing there. Now she's holding the baby. Weird. I don't get the baby until the weekend.

"Son, sit down." Her usual tough exterior isn't there. Her face is soft, and for a second I think I see a new kind of sad on her face. It isn't the same sad as earlier today at the funeral. I recognize this face. It's the same face I've seen only once or twice in my life time. The last time was when she was hurt at her job, and couldn't afford to get me school supplies.

I sit down into our couch. When I'm drafted man, first thing I'm going to buy is a new couch. No, scratch that...a whole new house! And I'm not even going to sell this raggedy house. I'll just give it away. Momma interrupts me from spending my millions.

***

I storm back down the hallway. I'm surprised at myself. I'm surprised at momma too, for not hollering for me to get back there. Whatever man. I fall back into my bed. I'm so angry. What

the hell am I supposed to do with a baby anyhow? I flick my basketball up into the air. I just feel like throwing it through my window. Maybe it will hit Keyshia's momma on the head and knock some sense into her. It ain't my fault all her kids have their kids staying over at her house. Damn, I don't even feel like playing anymore today. My mind can't get past what my Momma said. If we don't take the baby, they're going to give her up for adoption. Maybe that would be best. I got a lot to do in my senior year...Girls, dances, ball. I can't be worryin' about buying Pampers when I'm supposed to be practicing. Shoot, not with all those scouts waiting for me. I'm going to have them fighting over me. I heard about a senior last year who got a nice little truck from a scout. Maybe...

Momma knocks at my door. She never knocks.

"Yes?" She comes in making quick glances around to make sure I cleaned up like she asked me to before the funeral. She motions for me to come out into the front room. I follow her down the hallway and I can hear the baby beginning to fuss.

"Baby is going to be hungry soon. I'm going to go out and get some formula. You stay here. "

"But..."

"I'll be back in 30 minutes. You stay." The firmness in her face is back. There is no use arguing.

Again, I plop down into the couch. Momma softly closes the front door and I hear her locking the door behind her. It will be more than 30 minutes. The damn bus is always late. The baby starts to fuss a little louder. What the hell am I supposed to do? I'm supposed to be out playin' ball. He only gets louder. I flip on the television. Maybe he'll hear the noise and quiet down. No luck. I'll rock him in his little car seat a bit. This isn't working either. His little face is getting redder. Damn. I ain't picked up the baby all by myself yet. I remember how to do it though. I unfasten him from his car seat straps. His little face is all scrunched up. He kicks his tiny little legs. Okay, I am supposed to hold the back of his neck, I think, and scoop him up...almost like a football. As soon as I scoop him up, he stops crying and opens his eyes. Yep, those are my eyes alright.

Miles. What a funny name. That was Keyshia's doing. He puts his little hands up to his mouth, and squints at me. Look at that. He's got long basketball playing fingers. Suddenly I remember I am supposed to be mad. What right does her Grand momma

have...the baby lets out a tiny baby fart.

"Awww man Miles!!!" I can't help but smile down at him. It seems he's delighted with himself and he's smiling one of those toothless baby smiles.

"You sure are something to look at when you smile..." I stand up and start to walk around the room with him. He's happy now. How is that possible? I don't know anything about babies, or being a daddy.

****

I met my father for the first time when I was 13 years old. He stood at my momma's front door unannounced, dressed like an older version of all of my homeboys. I heard momma's footsteps behind me and I could almost feel her icy stare piercing over my shoulder.

"Can I help you?" she said.

"I'm here to talk to my son." He said in a tone I have never heard anyone speak to my mother with before. She looked at me and motioned for me to follow her to the kitchen.

"Son, you don't have to talk to him if you don't want to." I couldn't understand the look in her eyes then.

"I'm alright momma." I figured I could handle it.

He talked to me like I was one of his buddies. He didn't event ask questions, or explain his absence over the years.

"You like music?" he asked.

"Yes sir."

"You rhyme at all?"

"Sure. I can."

"Check this out." He pulled out a little notebook from his baggy jeans and started to flow. I watched his face. He really did look like me, just older. I ain't never seen a man this old with a little notebook trying to rhyme. I almost started to laugh.

"Yes sir, that was real good." I said lying.

"Man, I got this record company interested in me. We gonna hit it big time" He said proudly as he folded his notebook back up and put it back safely in his jeans. We talked for a bit longer. He said he was going to come back and shoot hoops with me because he heard I could hoop. As I watched him glide proudly to his flashy ride, I realized that he kept that little notebook full of false dreams more safe than he had ever tried to keep me, his own flesh and

blood. That was the last time I ever saw or heard from my father.

****

Momma came home from the store, and showed me how to make a bottle. She showed me how to test the formula on my wrist. It felt funny, I have to admit. I pictured Keyshia doing this a lot better then I was. It all felt clumsy.

"Son..."

"Momma look, I've been thinking...you done raised me already. I can't ask you to help me with this baby. You broke your back just to keep shoes on my feet. I'll quit school and get a job. I ain't had no daddy. Miles is going to have a daddy."

"Son, I didn't raise you up to be a fool. You're so close to graduation, it would be a shame to have you quit right now. You know I didn't finish high school, and you saw how hard it's been for me. We are going to do this together, and you are going to finish school...Maybe even go on to college. You know those scouts have been looking at you, and if that's your key to college, then I'm going to make sure it happens. But you are about to have more responsibility than you've ever had a day in your life."

Back in my room I tossed the basketball up in the air. Damn, all of this in one day. I wonder if this was the way my momma felt when she found she was pregnant with me. Suddenly I remember the game down at the park. Without thinking twice, I pull on my ball gear and head out the door.

At the park, the games were running as if nothing else in the world was going on. I jumped right in as if I had nothing on my mind. I was on fire tonight...hitting every shot. I even joined in all the trash talking that was going on. Nothing could touch me.

Slowly, the players began to leave the court to head to their houses. My boy and I walked home together.

"Sorry about Keyshia man."

"Thanks man."

"How's the baby."

"Man...I don't even know about that right now." I tell him about the baby's grandmomma dropping her off at our house. He blows air out of his cheeks.

"Man that's bogus." We walk a while longer and we near his house.

"Hey man, just keep your head up. You ain't the only one out here with a seed. Shoot. Half our boy's have kids already. Ain't

nothin."

Ain't nothin I think to myself as I walk home in the dark. He was right though, around here people my age are having kids left and right. I suppose I ain't any different. Suddenly all of those plans I had for my senior year seem tiny, like I was watching it all disappear from a rear view mirror.

From the front steps, I can hear Miles crying. I run inside. Momma is in the kitchen fixing his bottle again. I kick off my shoes and go over to him. Before I can pick him up, I hear momma.

"Son? Is that where your shoes belong?"

"No ma'am." I guess I ain't grown yet. I toss my shoes into my closet and wash up a bit. As I head back down the hall way, I hear that Miles has calmed back down.

"Son, I have some dishes to do. You take the baby and pat his back just like this until he burps." She looks at her watch. "It should be his bedtime. So I want you to rock him until he goes to sleep, and then I'll come help you lay him down. We'll set up the crib in your room. I figure the television takes up too much space so we'll move it out of there to make room for his bed."

"But..." Before I could go on, She puts the baby in my arms.

End

The Shankman

Todd Reed

Most days on the boning line at Rudkis Meat Packing, I don't remember. But that day in February, I'll never forget. I have spent four long years slugging clods of swine-flesh around in that sordid cavern of death they call a slaughter plant. And more than likely, I'll spend a few more miserable years numbing myself into this mechanized paralysis I've come to know as my life.

Inside the processing room the entrancing tunes of vibrating metal pulse throughout everything, either organic or inanimate. My hands hum along with the toiling mechanical drone of the patty machines, which plop out fleshy circles onto white waxy paper. There are massive grinders that squirt squiggles of tissue and thunder intermittently with the buzzing mechanical orchestra. The hypnotic epicenter of this motorized symphony belongs to the overhead cooling units droning out a frigid rhythm. The bone-shivering cold inside the processing room from these noise makers is only worsened by the frozen grip of winter on the cinder block walls and concrete floors.

The short winter days cheat me of warmth like the taxes cheated from my paychecks. And the torment of chilly nights, weight under my eyes with two crescent shaped leaden bags. The sun is always elusive to the employees of Rudkis Packing during these long winter months because we enter the doors in darkness, and leave just the same.

The good thing about winter is that the stench of decaying flesh mixed with manure doesn't stick to you like it does in the heat of summer. But never the less, it still seems to soak into your skin and embed itself just past the effectiveness of any soap. It's a stink like no other that can only be tamed and never subdued. It's the kind of stink that curdles in a person's stomach as fast as sour milk on a hundred degree day. Or the kind of putrid odor that squirms at the back of your throat like a wad of maggots pulsing in the bloated stomach of some sun baked week old highway road-kill.

The processing room is lit by the eye-draining burn of long florescent fixtures across the ceilings. The lights bleach color from the room as they bounce around on all the white surfaces of tables, walls, and starched smocks we call uniforms. The company name is

embroidered in a dull grayish thread on the front right pocket of each of the plants employees. Under that is my name, in the same monotone grey spelled out, B-o-b J-u-g-i-s.

By now I must have told my supervisor Dale Ingert a hundred times or more that it is spelled, J-u-r-g-i-s, and he always replies in the same fashion, "We'll have to get the forms filled out first, Bob." In the four years prior to that February day I had never seen the forms and every time that I would go to his office and ask for these so called forms he would say, "Well Bob I'm not quite sure where those are right now but when I dig'em up I'll get back to you." And then back to work I would go slouching and muttering under my breath.

I would go back to the dull white décor and multitudes of stainless steel tanks and bins of the processing room. Back to being the, "Shankman," as they say at the plant, where my job is to snatch up one of the slippery hams coming down the stainless steel chute from the other room. I flop the pig butt onto my cutting board, remove the shank, and send the two pieces in their corresponding directions. It only takes two swift jerks of a blade to swipe a shank clean off for a good shankman like me. The first cut to move through the top layer of tendon down to the center of the joint to break the cartilage, and another to come around the rest of the knuckle bone and out the other side. I can spot the joint through the fat layer on the outside every time. I have never actually counted, but I'll bet more than a couple hundred shanks are detached by the edge of my blade each day of the week. I would think that it would earn me a bit more than, J-u-g-i-s.

The thing about working with pork though, is keeping your hands clean. Pigs are filthy creatures and butchering them is an even filthier business. Along with the bloody aprons and splattering juices there are all kinds of repulsive aspects of the job. Sometimes the ham knuckles will be fetid with slimy goop as you crack through the shanks. Most of the time these are arthritic and the joint is just a little oily; and then, there are the ptomaine which spew forth a coagulated lime-green puss. These shanks have a stink nauseating for even an experienced shankman like me.

It is no rare occurrence that the infected joints would unavoidably squirt out everywhere. Even given the amount of chemicals used to clean up, it never seems to fail that the bacteria finds its way into the little creases along the sides of your nails. From there the bacteria work their way deep within the recesses of the nail

bed and begin to breed.

It was on that day in February, that everything changed. It started the same as it had any time before, with that strange feeling as if something was stuck under the nail. It is an irritating sensation that captivates your every thought and begs you to fumble with and probe the site in constant investigation. But you always know, no matter how much you wash and scrub, that it is just too late and the bacteria have already established a plentiful colony of torture beneath your nail. You know the agony of the week that lay ahead. You can anticipate the endless days of trying to protect the digit and still attempt to keep up with the work load in front of you. Still, you scrub. You wash.

The night before I did everything I could think of to slow the growth of the bacterial army mounting an offensive force within my finger. But all my efforts of soaking and scrubbing had been in vain when I awoke that morning in terrible agony. During the night the micro-organisms must have constructed a thriving empire in the index finger of my left hand.

My finger had begun to swell and pulsate in pain. The infection was deep and I could hardly stand the slightest pressure against my finger. It ached and throbbed at every pump within my chest and made working even more unbearable. My finger itself was plump and bright red like a cherry tomato. The nail was swollen so much so that it had begun to deform ever so slightly, crinkling a bit along the edge, turning a yellowish snot color.

I wished I could have stayed at home in my bed all day. I would have stayed there in my quiet empty home, coddling my discomforted finger. Instead, I went to work. I went to deal with the most revolting human beings on the planet first thing in the morning. Bartholomew Augustus Flandry is his full human name but he is really more sub-human actually. So much so, that I like to refer to him as the vertical swine. His plump freckled cheeks that almost flap as he speaks spitting at you and his curly red hair that I swear would match positive for swine DNA if tested.

It was like he was waiting there to screw with me, leaning on my locker, just knowing the kind of morning I was having with the pain rippling up my arm. "Bout time you showed up Jughead," he said with a moronic laugh to follow.

"Knock it off Bart, I'm not in the mood for this crap today," I said as I pulled my locker door open and pushed him to the side.

"Oh aren't we pissy this morning."

"I mean it," I said and gave him a long stern glare.

"Poor Jughead. You wake up with a wet spot in your bed this smornin?"

"It's Jur-gis, shit head. Remember it." I could smell his rank cigarette breath billowing from behind the jagged stained teeth jutting from his annoying grin as he stood there, happy to irritate me even further. The odor was intense from the immeasurable number of smokes he had sucked away and what I'm sure was a lifetime spent without brushing those neanderthal chewing tools in his face. I could just imagine him going home in the evenings to his cave and drawing stick figures and hand prints on the walls.

I left the man-swine standing there and headed for the linen room where the uniforms were hanging neatly in there rows. I buried my head in the fresh smocks and squeezed hard around the base of my finger trying to forget the ever worsening ache in my hand. I shook it around whimpering to myself and flicked through the uniforms to find mine. And there it was, J-u-g-i-s.

"Hey Jughead," I heard the vertical swine oinking from over by the lockers.

"Jurgis! Get it right damn it."

"Mr. Ingert was looking for you."

"Piss off pig face." I pulled down my smock from the hanger and swung it over my shoulders. I could feel the sleeve brushing along my finger like a thousand red hot needles stabbing into it. I clinched my teeth and eased it the rest of the way through the arm hole.

I stammered down the hall to Mr. Ingert's office and stood in the open doorway. "Mr. Ingert," I began to say as he cut me off without looking up from his tidy little desk. He raised his hand and pointed to the sign on the door. I rolled my eyes and sighed as took a step backwards and then knocked on the door frame.

"Ok yes, just a minute," he said making me wait, probably for no reason at all except just to make sure that the next time I might remember to knock first. "What can I do for you this morning Bob."

"Well like I was trying to say, Bart said you wanted to see me."

"I haven't seen Bart this morning."

"So you didn't need anything?" I asked realizing that it was just Bart messing with me.

"Look Bob, I'm a pretty busy guy and I really don't have time

for all this. So get to the point."

Knowing what his response would be from the hundreds of rehearsals before this I said it anyway; "You know my smocks still don't have my damn name spelled right."

"Look Bob," he said getting very boss like. "It's bad enough you come in here this morning wasting my time but you swear at me again like that and your getting written up. Now Like I've told you before, when I get the paper work together we can sit down and get this taken care of. But right now I'm a little busy and you are about ten minutes late. So I suggest you go on and get your day back on the happy track."

"Yeah well when the hell are you not busy," I muttered under my breath.

"What was that Bob?" he snapped.

"I said, sorry Mr. Ingert," and I turned to leave knocking my hand against the wall. The pain shot bolts flashing up my arm as I staggered down the hall toward the processing room.

All I could do to get my mind off the throbbing in my finger was to think about getting back at Bart. But it was useless to try to ignore the sensation in my finger which looked as if it could burst open at any minute. The hams were stacking up on me now and it took everything I had to push as fast as I could go. Each and every shank was another agonizing endeavor. I was completely absorbed in every inescapable way. I worked with my finger pointing out and tried to hold the shanks steady as I would swipe them off. Although, now it was more of a gnawing action and not at all smooth or calculated like it should be.

By noon that day the pain had grown increasingly intolerable. I couldn't take it. I struggled to untie my apron and left my station headed for Dale Inger's office. Little to my surprise the door was closed now and the little courtesy reminder was hanging on the outside that said, "Remember to knock first," in its smug little way. I could almost hear the stupid self-motivating posters lining the walls of his office telling me that, "A happy worker has a happy attitude." I wanted to smash that sign. I wanted to burn that damn poster and everything in that office.

I wanted to kick in the door in and give him the happy attitude of my finger in his face, and not the aching one either. But of course, I couldn't ever do something like that, especially after this morning. So gently I tapped my knuckles against the door and sput-

tered out, "Mr. Ingert, Sir?" No answer came from behind the door. My disgruntled jaw clinched down all by itself and I sighed knocking a bit louder this time.

I gave it some force, "Mr. Ingert."

"Who is it?" he barked.

"It is me Bob Jurgis sir and I need to speak with you right away." I waited for his reply leaning in to the door trying to hear his thoughts through the silence.

"Again Bob, you'll have to give me a few minutes here, or better yet why don't you just come back in a short while, will you?"

"But sir…," I began to say as he cut me off for the second time that day.

"Just a few minutes Bob," he gave to me from behind that stupid smug sign.

He couldn't even open the door and give me a proper brush-off to my face this time. My irritability transformed quickly into ravenous anger as it burned and surged up from my reddened digit. Something inside of me had erupted and there was no going back. I clasped down around the base of my finger hard to try and subdue the greenish monster that lurked under my nail.

"Ahhh!" I screamed out loud and went running for my station. I grabbed my knife in a blind tyrannical rage and steadied myself at the front of my cutting board. My eyes surged open wide and glaring. I placed my hand on the table with my index finger jutting straight out and then firmly placed the tip of my knife down on the table to line up the blade. I brought the back edge of the blade in line with the first knuckle of my finger and pulled my body up on my toes to use all my weight and get it done in one swipe, like it should be. I bit up a pinch of smock from my shoulder between my teeth, grunted, and wrenched down hard. One quick sort of crunching slice and it was off. I fell weak and caught myself on the table starring down at my now trembling and bloody hand. The little painless nub laid there smeared with blood, throbbing no more.

Grabbing hold of my bounding adrenaline I clamped down tight on my severed finger. I began to chuckle a bit to myself as I grabbed the bloody nub and went blazing back towards Mr. Ingert's office. As I rounded the corner of the hallway Bart was as usual strolling around avoiding work. I barreled forward right into him. He went straight to his fat ass and I stopped and stood over him with grin from ear to ear. The blood running from between my

fingers was dripping out over the front of my white smock. I snarled at him dead in the eyes and I could smell the weakness seeping from his pores. I began laughing uncontrollably and shook the bloody digit over him to splatter his face with my crimson triumph. I laughed and screamed in his blood speckled face, "it's an R, Just one little R."

"Jesus Christ Bob alright, Jesus what the hell have you done?"

"Say it you pig faced swine, say Jurgis. With an R you son of a bitch, say it. Say it now!"

Cowering in tears, "Jesus, God, Jurgis. Jurgis!"

I clamped the spurting finger off and raced to the end of the hall to the office of Dale Ingert. I turned my shoulder into the door and crashed right through that smug little sign hanging on the front.

Startled and dazed, Dale Ingert fell back out of his chair onto the floor. His face was drenched in terror and before he could speak the bloody nub went thudding across his neat and orderly desk dribbling blood from one end to the other.

"Bob," he said very calmly as I looked up at his trembling face and blank glazed eyes. He stretched out his nervous hand clutching a few now wrinkled papers.

"I got the name on your smocks changed," he said as his brow puzzled up in perplexed awe.

End

Cancer Crisis

Katie Ramsey

She's sitting in a blur of tears and beer. God, how long has she been here? She glances over to her left and counts the empty bottles on the folding table. Nine drained of their life. She's sitting on the deck. This is her place of solace from the rest of the world; except for tonight. She then realizes that something is missing. She looks down at her finger and feels a stab of panic when she sees that the ring is missing. She cautiously gets up and looks around on the floor by the chair. The object which she seeks is reflecting light from the street light. She reaches over to grab it, but her vision starts to swim and it's all she can do to stand up straight without tumbling sideways. "Why did I have to drink so much?" she asks herself.

She takes a deep breath and steadies herself this time before reaching for the ring. She bends her knees slowly and finally succeeds in reaching the ring. She slowly gets back up and plops into the chair. The whole deck is spinning now and she closes her eyes. The second she does, she is brought back to the days events. She is trying to forget the whole damn day and the horrible things that have happened. Not only is she powerless against it, but she has no one there to support or comfort her. She attempts to rid herself of everything by squeezing her eyes shut, but it's no use.

Lily has an average job and an average life. She works full time at the Walgreens Photo Lab in Sarasota Florida. She moved down there with her boyfriend Dick. Lily never wanted to stay in the Midwest because she hates the cold weather. The idea of moving to Southwest Florida with the man of her dreams was so romantic. She didn't give it a seconds thought.

They made the drive down together and had their whole lives planned out. What Lily hadn't expected was the place Dick had picked out for the two of them. He had managed to find the cutest little condo right on the beach. The view was like something out of a brochure. Lily couldn't be happier with her life. She was young, care free and in love.

Dick warned her that he was going to have to start working some crazy hours to pay for their new home. Lily insisted she would be okay on her own. She could finally get a lot of reading done sitting by the water.

On nights he didn't have to work, they would grab a 12 pack and head over to the beach. They had a favorite lifeguard tower they would sit at. They would talk about work, life, whatever came to mind. They would make love to the rhythm of the ocean. Time was lost until the rising sun reminded them that they'd been out all night. Lily thought these were the happiest times of her life.

Despite everything going so well, there was something that was always gnawing away at her. While her relationship with the Dick was flowering, she felt like the distance from her mother was causing their relationship to wilt. Lily and her mother had always been close. They had that woman to woman connection that only mother and daughter could share. When Lily decided she was moving to Florida with Dick she put off telling her mother. She knew it would be hard on her mom and she didn't want to deal with it.

When Lily finally worked up the nerve to tell her mom, her mother acted like it was no big deal. Lily mistook this for her mom being okay with the whole thing. Maybe she was just relieved that her mom didn't flip out. If she had looked closely at how her mom reacted she would have figured out what her reaction really meant; her mom not wanting to deal with the news at all. She was no where near being okay with her daughter moving to Florida. She would pick a great time to bring that up too.

Lily and her mother were sitting outside on the porch one night before she left. They had their feet up, seats reclined, and were well stocked with icy cold margaritas. Lily was going on about how excited and happy she was. Her mother had been quite and listened to all Lily said. When Lily paused to take a sip was when her mom chimed in.

"Lily, I know you don't want to hear this, but I'm going to say it anyways. You really shouldn't be moving down there with this guy. We've had trouble with him in the past, and he never even makes an attempt to come over. He's all wrong for you and you know you could do so much better. I think you need to reconsider what you are doing. This is a very big step."

"Oh Mom, please! I love Dick and I want to be with him for the rest of my life. I know you and Dad haven't seen eye to eye with him, but he's tried. He doesn't come over because he doesn't feel welcome. I think if you guys tried harder to be nice, you would have known him better by now! I really wish you could just accept

this and be happy for me!"

Her mother grumbled something inaudible and that was the end of the conversation.

Lily departed for Florida a week after that. Her parents held tight smiles as she and Dick pulled out of the driveway. It saddened her that that was the last look she would see on her parents' faces.

The whole drive down had Lily second guessing her decision. Her mom always had the power to make her think twice no matter how strongly Lily felt about something. Once she actually arrived though, her mind was cleared. Florida was more beautiful than she could have imagined. She knew then and there she had made the right choice.

After about a month of being there the newness wore off and homesickness hit Lily like a tidal wave. She cried to Dick every night about how much she missed her family. She felt guilty for sitting on the deck of her beautiful beach condo that he was working hard to pay for, crying her eyes out over feeling sorry for herself.

But it soon passed and Lily moved on with her life. She even made a friend at Walgreens. Her name was Randi. Randi was wild with chopped black and pink hair and a taste for danger. She excited Lily because she never had a friend like her before. They would occasionally go out for drinks and Randi had 4 shots for everyone of Lily's 1 beer. Lily tried to be the responsible one and always watched how much she drank.

One evening Lily decided to throw her cares to the wind. She and Dick had gotten into a fight before he left for work. It was suppose to be his night off and he got called in. Lily wouldn't have minded if they hadn't already had plans for a night out on the town. This wasn't the first time this had happened either. He explained that if she wanted to stay in this condo he had to work.

"Lily, I explained to you from day one that I would be working a lot to keep us out of financial trouble and you said you were okay with it."

"I am okay with it, but all you do is work. I don't remember the last time we actually just sat down and discussed how each other's lives are going!"

"I don't have time for this. You knew how it was going to be so just deal with it!"

At that he slammed the door shut and left for work. As soon as

she heard him leave the parking lot she called Randi. Randi was always up for going out and Lily couldn't take another night of being in her place alone.

They met at the Fish Bone restaurant right next to their work. They nibbled on appetizers and ordered a couple bottles of wine. Lily summed up what had happened and why she wanted to go out. She was finally starting to loosen up from her argument with Dick. Randi sucked down a shot of Patron, slammed it down on the table and looked at Lily.

"Come on, we're going to Siesta Key. After a night like you've had, it's the only logical thing to do. You need to let loose before you drive both of us crazy!"

Lily started to protest because she knew what that meant. Going out to the Key meant a night of binge drinking and dancing with whoever you ran into. She was tired of holding back and being conservative. Tonight was her night to have fun!

They started at the Daiquiri Deck. Lily was still thinking about how aggravated she was with Dick and after 5 Diesel Daiquiris she started to voice her thoughts.

"You know, I don't even know why I'm here. I moved down to be with this guy, and I never see him! All he does is work and it doesn't seem to bother him at all. Maybe he just doesn't want to spend time with me anymore."

"Look, he's trying his hardest to provide you with a life that he thinks you deserve, give the guy a break."

"Maybe he's seeing someone else. That would make sense. We don't even talk anymore and everything is falling apart. Oh god, I just want to go home."

"Home?! No way girlfriend, the night is young!"

"I was referring to a different kind of home."

When she finally got back home that night she was still thinking about her life. Her mom hadn't called her much since she left. She knew she was still upset that she decided to leave anyways, but she didn't think it would be like this. Her mom wasn't one to hold a grudge. Lily thought this whole thing would have blown over by now. She wasn't just her mom, she was a good friend. They even shared a ying yang friendship ring. It was more Lily's idea, but her mom didn't protest.

Her mother would always come to her rescue when dad was

playing the bad guy. When Dad said no, Mom always said yes. They had an understanding that her dad didn't get. This move was hard on her too and she hoped her mom knew that.

The next day Lily had just gotten off of work and was on her way to Target to get some shopping done. Her phone starting ringing and she was surprised to see the caller ID read that is was her mom. She scolded herself for talking while driving, but it was her mom calling. She made an exception.

"Hey mom, what's up?"

"Hey, Lily. Sorry I haven't called much. I've been in and out of the doctor getting some tests done."

"Tests? What kind of tests?"

"Well, I had to go see an oncologist and have a mammogram. I just got the results back and I have caner."

The non-chalantness and shock of the statement almost sent Lily off into the ditch. It was rush hour traffic on Friday with the blue hairs and trying to avoid an accident was hard enough without a damn cell phone. The way her mom relayed this news reminded Lily of when she told her mom she was moving. It was like she thought the news was no big deal. Lily knew better now, though. Her mom was trying to play it cool so Lily wouldn't freak out.

"Oh my God, I can't believe this! "Cancer?"

"Yes, it's breast cancer, but the good news is that I had a physical about a month and half ago and they didn't find anything then, so it hasn't really had time to spread."

Lily almost laughed at the fact that her mom had just used the word cancer and good news in the same sentence. Had she gone mad? The rest of the conversation was a blur. She thought they talked about the difference in each other's weather, but she couldn't be sure. Lily was trying to keep her self focused on the road. Now she was really regretting answering the phone at all.

She vaguely heard her mom saying something about a surgery to remove it, radiation and chemo. It was like living in a real world episode of ER. She also found that ironic because it used to be their favorite show to watch together.

She got off the phone just as she arrived at Target. She parked and just sat in her car as she stared at nothing. Now that the car was off and there was no air conditioning, she felt the heat as it began to engulf her and she quickly exited the car.

She dragged herself across the suffocating black top parking lot and through the entrance of the store. The whoosh of cold air took the breath from her lungs. It was so refreshing that she was able to clear her mind for a second and have peace. It didn't last long.

Lily walked through the store like a zombie. She kept running into people and mumbling "sorry." Kids asked their parents what was wrong with that lady. She found herself in front of the frozen foods section. She opened one of the freezer doors and took a deep breath of the frozen air as she tried to snap out of it. "I don't even remember what I came here for." She slammed the freezer door shut and the surrounding air felt suffocating and humid. Not at all refreshing like when she had first walked in. "God, why's it always so hot? I hate the heat !" She walked in a stupor back through the store and through the exit. She trudged through the sticky and hot parking lot back to her car.

She could feel herself beginning to break down. Her pulse was quick, she was breathing shallowly, and stubborn tears wouldn't leave her eyes alone. She couldn't give in though because she was afraid of how long the crying would last. No, she had to pull herself together enough to crawl back through the traffic and safely arrive at the condo.

After she sat in traffic for 45 minutes Lily finally got back to the condo. She almost lost it a couple of times in the bumper to bumper traffic. When a lady in a Porche on her cell phone cut her off without thinking twice she almost rear-ended her just for the satisfaction. She didn't know what to do with herself so she sat on the leather couch in the living room. It was cool to the touch. "Thank God for central air." Now that she had time to herself the full impact of the word cancer and all of its deadly possibilities overtook her. Suddenly she was crying so hard that she wondered where it was all coming from. The sobs were so violent that they raked over her whole body. They started in her stomach, climbed through her chest and exploded through her wretched sobs.

"This can't be happening. This is the type of thing that happens to other people, not to my Mom. I can't even do anything to help her!"

The guilt of distance washed over her and she began again to regret moving so far away from her family.

Dick was now on midnights and was sleeping only feet away

in the comfort of their bedroom oblivious to the torture Lily was going through. She envied him for it. She would have given anything to be asleep at that moment. She longed to be unaware of what was going on around her and sleeping peacefully with no worries or cares. But she was awake, and had to deal with all of this somehow. She needed to turn to Dick, because she really needed to talk to someone about this. And the fact that he was the only one there.

She entered the room and gazed at him as he slept peacefully. She absentmindedly played with the half ying- yang ring on her index finger as she decided whether or not she would wake him up.

Whether she wanted to or not become irrelevant because her heart wrenching sobs had woken him up. He sat up and looked at her lazily. Once it finally dawned on him that she was crying hysterically he immediately became alert.

"What's wrong?"

Lily was crying so hard that she was hyperventilating and couldn't catch her breath long enough to get out a simple sentence.

"Why can't you just tell me what's wrong? Are you okay? You need to calm down or you're going to make yourself sick!"

"My, my, m-m-m-m-y, M-m-m-m-om has c-c-c-cancer!" This is all she managed to squeeze out before a fresh wave of realization and tears choked of her words. When she heard herself say it out loud it was so much worse than just saying them in her head. She grabbed the dresser at the foot of the bed for stability.

Dick was stunned at what she had just told him. He propped himself up on the bed. He looked like he was having trouble comprehending what she had just said. "Whoa, slow down, baby. Come over here so we can talk."

"No!" She walked out of the room and slammed the door. She returned to the couch and continued to sob. She was expecting Dick to come out after her, but he doesn't show up. Maybe he just wanted to throw some clothes on really quick.

She got up and headed for the kitchen this time. She swung open the fridge door and grabbed a Miller. She un-screwed the cap and took a long, greedy swig. The icy liquid slid down her throat and coated her insides with a chilled calmness. She took her beer and walked back to their bedroom. She opened the door to see Dick fast asleep in the middle of the bed. She couldn't believe her eyes! She just told the man she'd been with for the past three years that

her mom had cancer and he just went back to sleep!

She supposed she shouldn't really be surprised by what she saw. His betrayal by falling back to sleep reminded her of another time when she desperately needed his support and all he was willing to do was shatter her spirit. It seemed like any time Lily was having a really hard time with something, it wasn't a big deal to him. He didn't have to deal with it and often times he just blew her off.

The sight of him lying there with the retched memories of him never willing to console her helped Lily to finish the rest of her beer in one loud gulp. She felt betrayed. She moved here for this guy and he wouldn't even be there for her. So much for support. She wanted to punch him. She wanted to throw him off the bed. She wanted to do anything that would make him hurt. How could he care about her so much and just go back to sleep? She ran from the room earlier because she didn't know what to do or how to be comforted.

She re-closed the door and went for another beer. Lily quickly drained that one and grabbed her 3rd. She headed out to the deck. She called Randi hoping she would be able to say something to make her feel better. After the third ring Lily fell into despair."

"Randi can't get to the phone right now. She's probably too hung over to take your call. Leave one!"

Lily started to say something and press the END button on her cell instead. She didn't feel like explaining this situation to someone else that wasn't there for her.

"God, why did I move here? I have no one I want to talk to and my boyfriend is absolutely worthless."

She was now filled with a despair that ran deeper than her mother's bad news. She attempted to dull the pain with a 4th beer.

As Lily brings herself back to the present she glances over at the table. She doesn't even remember the 5th, 6th, 7th, 8th and 9th beer. She looks down at the ring that she shares with her mom. She balls her hand into a fist to make sure that the ring doesn't move. She can't control the evil fate multiplying in her mom's body and she sure as hell can't control Dick's unresponsiveness in her time of need. She could at least keep the ring from disappearing from her finger.

Lily staggers inside and starts a pot of coffee. She pours herself a cup and sits at the table in the kitchen. She wraps her hands

around the mug for warmth and stability. Her head has cleared by the time she finishes the pot. She glances at the clock. It is nearly 11 at night. Mr. Worthless will be getting up for work soon. She doesn't want to deal with him now. She is finally starting to feel a little better and he is the last thing she needs right now. Maybe she'll walk to the beach just to avoid the confrontation.

Lily walks back outside to clean up the bottles. After they have all been cleared Lily returns one last time to clean the table itself. The cold beer mixed with Florida's summer heat has left perspiration rings all over the table. Lily steadies her gaze at the table. She takes a deep breath and begins to remove the rings.

End

Corresponding Shapes

Lauren Comer

The roar of the cars isn't enough to drown out the song that Evie's singing as we walk along the storefronts on Michigan Avenue. I don't know what song it is, or who it's by, only that I think it's one of Fiona's new favorites, and Evie's faulty soprano isn't exactly doing it justice. I think, briefly, about Fiona's training in music at Columbia and what a beautiful, pitch-perfect voice she has, even when she's just singing Beatles songs in the shower and she thinks I can't hear her.

We stop and wait for the light to change, and Evie turns to me and tells me with a half-smile that she's absolutely starving. She looks ridiculous, bundled up in a bright-pink down parka with a green knit ski cap snug around her ears. She looks ridiculous and yet when I look at her, my heart tumbles around in my chest a little, like a gymnast inside my ribcage.

"Do you think," she asks, tilting her head, "do you think that maybe we could go somewhere?" She hesitates, just for a second, and chews on the end of her white-blonde braid. "For dinner, I mean." She looks up at me again and her eyes are bright, guileless, and yet I can't help feeling like she's leading me into some kind of trap. She has been acting differently, lately, than she usually does – at least, I think it's different. She looks at me like she's never seen me before, like she's studying me, trying to figure something out about me, or about us – not that there's any us in any sort of relationship sense.

I pause. "Sure," I say, and swallow hard. "There's nobody waiting up for me."

This is a lie, and I'm not sure why I'm telling it. I know it's a lie, and Evie knows that it's a lie. Evie knows Fiona - likes Fiona, I think. At least, when we used to hang out, back when Fiona and I were still in college, finishing our degrees, they got along. Evie knows we're still dating, knows we moved in together.

Evie knows these things, and I know these things, but neither of us mentions these things, and I don't know why.

She shivers and I have to laugh because I forget sometimes that Evie's not from around here, that she's from halfway across the country where February just means Valentine's Day, not grey-black

snow and the taste of stale winter air.

In California, they don't know bleak.

Sometimes I think Evie doesn't know it either, even though she's been here for two and a half years now, ever since she transfered to Northwestern, where we met my junior year of college. I have to wonder if she's the only reason I'm still functioning in the middle of this never-ending cold spell that Chicago enjoys calling a season, because there's something like sunshine that shines out through her skin and makes her glow even when the rest of the city is so dark and dank that I think I might choke. When I think about it - which I try not to, very often - I realize that this is a bad train of thought to be riding. Of all the things that should be keeping me going - Fiona, my job, Fiona, my family, Fiona - Evie shouldn't even appear on the list. And yet.

We see each other maybe once a month, always spontaneously, and we have since I graduated, a year and a half ago. Fiona doesn't know, and I don't know why I haven't told her, because all we do when we see each other is talk, catch up on old times, chat about jobs and school - she's got another semester to go - and family and pets and all that useless, meaningless stuff. And if I feel just a little bit guiltier after every spontaneous meeting, if it takes a little bit longer to get Evie's smile out of my mind every time, I do my best to ignore it, although ignoring it has been getting significantly more difficult every time.

Next to me, Evie's hands flutter in the air like tiny impatient birds and I want to tell her to keep still, I want to tell her that she's making me nervous, but something in the back of my mind says that maybe that has less to do with the movement of her hands and more to do with the way her eyes reflect the streetlights, so I keep quiet and watch the cars zoom past in technicolor blurs instead.

She takes my arm when we start to walk again and tells me she's freezing, and I half want to tell her to just take my coat because suddenly I don't feel the least bit cold.

::

The light in the all-night diner on East 76th is too harsh, too fluorescent, and it turns her skin pale yellow. I can see sleep-circles under her eyes.

"So," I start as we open our menus, "do you ever actually go to bed, or do you just stay out all night, looking for new guys to take

you to dinner at midnight?" I find myself being ridiculously interested in the answer, find myself really, really wanting her to say that I am the only one.

"Can I have a quarter?" she asks. She shrugs her coat off while I dig one out of my pocket. Flipping through selections in the mini-jukebox that's attached to the wall next to us, she drops it in and selects 'Do Ya Think I'm Sexy' by Rod Stewart with a self-effacing grin.

The idea that I might be getting myself in too deep for nothing hits me, hard, like a car crash. Across from me, Evie goes suddenly, frighteningly quiet, her hands gripping the edges of the menu like it's a life preserver, like it's the only thing keeping her from drowning. She is not a nervous person, usually, or a quiet one, and I wonder what she's thinking. I wonder if she's taking my question just as seriously, as stupidly seriously, as I am.

"No," she says after a minute, her eyes cast down, looking at the menu, "you're the only guy I ask to take me to dinner at midnight." And then she looks up, and her eyes are so light they're almost transparent, and I realize that I'm in too deep already, that there is no "getting," that I have been in too deep for quite a while now. I realize, with a sudden burst of sickening clarity, that this is not something harmless, and that I am in trouble, and that I should go home, right now - should bolt out the door, run home and take Fiona to bed and maybe propose to her and never, never see Evie again.

Maybe this is part of the problem, part of the reason that I am here with Evie instead of home with Fiona. Proposing, I mean. I haven't done it. We've talked about it, idly, over breakfasts with pancakes and dinners with wine, and we haven't really come to any sort of conclusion, so I haven't done anything about it. Fiona says she'd like to, someday, when we're a little older and we have a little more money, and I say – well, I don't say, mostly I just murmur and make noncommittal noises and nod, and that seems to satisfy Fiona, most of the time. Maybe if I propose to her, all of this will go away.

Instead, I shut the menu and tell her I'm just going to get a chocolate shake, but I don't tell her it's because I don't think I could take anything more substantial. When Evie smiles at me, little lines crinkling softly around her eyes, and says that that sounds good and can she share it with me, I think that maybe I'm not the only one who's in too deep.

::

By the time I get home it's two-thirty and I wonder if I smell like the diner - like greasy fries and hamburgers with everything - or if I smell like Evie's perfume, Chanel Number Something-Or-Another, sweet and a little bit flowery, not like Fiona, who always smells fresh and soapy. I walk into the door and Fiona's sprawled asleep on the couch, half-covered with the blanket her mother knitted for us when we moved in together. She has the remote held loosely in one hand, the television playing 'The Way We Were' for the thousandth time. It's near the end, where Barbra Streisand smooths Robert Redford's hair and tells him that his girl is lovely. I slip the remote from her hand and flip it off.

I steady my breathing and sit down on the floor next to the couch and watch her lips part when she lets out a tiny sigh. She stirs after a few moments, brown eyes fluttering open, lifts a hand and runs it through my hair with a slow sleepy smile.

I lean in and kiss her too exuberantly, too passionately, and she tilts her head and looks at me and I feel terrible, immediately feel like scum, and my throat closes up a little, choking me, which is nothing less than I deserve.

"Where were you?" she asks, and her hand drops back onto the couch again, and she sits up a little straighter and licks her lips. I wonder if she is searching for something or if that's just my guilt talking.

"Ran into a friend," I tell her, "and we went to a late dinner and lost track of time."

All of this is, of course, entirely true, although I can't help wondering if she would see it this way. I wonder how she would feel about me meeting Evie late at night like this, like clandestine lovers even though we aren't lovers and there isn't any need to be clandestine when you're just friends with someone.

"I'm sorry," I say, and bury my face in her hair, and I can hear her giggle the way she always does, and something in my stomach clenches at the sound. "It won't happen again," I say, and tug her up and wrap my arms around her. She feels good against me, soft and comfortable and so, so familiar.

I wonder if that's true, if it won't happen again, and I wonder what falling in love feels like, because maybe this is something else, something innocent and harmless, like food poisoning, and maybe everything is going to be okay. I don't remember what it felt

like to fall in love with Fiona; it just kind of happened. We met at the public library, where we both reached for the same copy of Hemingway's The Son Also Rises, me for an English class and her for some light reading, and we started talking and then we started dating and then we moved in together. It was all very natural, and there were no fireworks and no brass bands playing, and maybe that's why this feels so strange because I know I love Fiona but I also know I have never felt this way about Fiona.

When we climb into bed Fiona doesn't lay her head on my chest like she usually does, doesn't use me like a human pillow, doesn't curl up close with her soft body pressed flush against mine. Instead she shifts away, head flat on the pillow, face turned toward the door. The crackle of the brand-new sheets is amplified in the death-quiet of the room, and the feeling in my stomach grows into something I can't ignore so easily.

::

"Ethan?" says Fiona the next morning, her voice guarded and edgy. I know that voice, and I know what's coming.

"Fiona," I say, and kiss her softly. Her lips taste like coffee, and I wonder if mine taste like guilt. I sit down across from her, running my eyes over the grain of the wood in the table instead of looking up, and sip at the mug of lukewarm tea that's in front of me. It doesn't taste like much.

I used to think that if a person were good enough to you to not only remember what you liked to drink in the morning but to make it every day, you should never let her go. If you could find someone you could settle into a routine with, someone you could know, inside and out, someone who made you feel safe, that you should never let her get away.

Now I think I don't know what I'm doing.

When I look up she's just staring at me expectantly, and I know I should say something, I know I should assuage her fears so she can feel better, and so I can feel better, but the words catch in my throat and I stop because maybe - maybe I deserve to feel this bad about it.

She takes another sip of coffee and there's realization in her eyes, and such sadness that I feel a little like dying because I never wanted to hurt her, even though I don't know how I could have expected it to turn out any different. I know that technically I haven't done anything wrong, not really, not yet, but it feels like I have,

because the way Evie's fluttering hands and the feel of her pressed against me keeps running through my mind like a video loop certainly feels like a betrayal.

She stands up without another word and moves out of my line of sight and I stare into the translucent liquid in the cracked porcelain mug and wonder what song it was that Evie was singing last night and I try to remember the last time I told Fiona I loved her.

I try to figure out what I'm doing, and why, and the aftertaste of coffee and Fiona on my lips makes me think about what I should do.

I take another sip of tea, and I can still see the echo of the streetlight reflections in Evie's eyes and I wonder if should and going to ever cross paths.

Another sip, and the tea is ice-cold.

End

Peaches

Michelle Moore

"You're telling me, you're actually looking forward to working this summer? You want to get a job?"

I just smile, waving out the window as a semi slowly cruised past them in reverse. "Yup!" The long, low tone of the truck's horn sounds in my ear. I duck back into the car.

The driver snorts derisively. "Yeah well, wait until you have to work to make a living. See how much you enjoy your work when you have bills to pay and mouths to feed."

"Why shouldn't I enjoy it?"

"Huh?"

"I asked why shouldn't I enjoy my work?" There is no spite in my voice, just the timid curiosity of a girl who has only recently begun to think for herself.

The car lurches forward as the driver unexpectedly guns the engine, and the conversation is quickly lost beneath the roar of tires on the road. I am the navigator on this wayward journey. He's the driver.

The speeding car comes upon another semi-truck. The cab has been painted a bright and cheery orange. I try to lean out the window, waving and grinning, to draw another horn blast our way, but the driver suddenly rolls up the window.

Another stab at the gas pedal leads me to cast a wary eye at the speedometer.

' 90. He's doing 90, now. Sheesh.'

"Okay, look, I'll make you a deal: You just keep speeding and I won't say a word about it... but if you get pulled over and get a ticket, I reserve every right to be mad at you for the rest of the trip home."

He scowls at me in the rear view mirror; I am sprawled languidly across the backseat. "You'll do no such thing. Besides..." here he punches the engine again, mockingly, "You're too young to drive. What do you know about it, anyway?"

I shrug, unaffected. Sunlight is streaming in the windows, pinking my cheeks, and it seems a waste not smile.

Three miles later, he checks his gauges. "We have to stop. This thing is a hell of a gas whore."

I look around for the neon flicker of a nearby truck stop, but

my driver cuts across three lanes without asking the help of his young navigator.

On either side, thick, bright greenery rises and falls away as we make our way through the Appalachians.

"Georgia, huh?" he remarks. "Skid mark of a state. I like the heat, but we seem to spend a lot of time in the middle of nowhere!" With a glancing, he moved into the exit lane for the next gas stop. "Still, I'd rather drive through this than the spontaneous monsoon we had on the trip out."

"I think it's beautiful."

The exit ramp is lined with magnolia trees, sweeping and elegant. Peachy-pink blossoms dust the roadway like some foreign, southern snow. Their exoticness amuses me and I smiles. I've never seen trees like these in the Midwest. I am just about to comment on them when we come upon the gas station. The asphalt peels away beneath us in a haze of gravel and dust. We stop.

"Wow, talk about the middle of nowhere! We're just south of Podunk and just north of Mayberry!" I quip, taking in the small station and it's clientele.

"Like you fuckin' know where we are," he snaps.

Climbing out of the vehicle, we stretch our travel-weary limbs. The back of my slender thighs have been plastered to the faux-leather seat covers in the midday heat and I've begun to contemplate a bottle of water. I'm not wearing shoes, and the sun-baked gravel stings the soles of my feet as I shift. It's not an altogether unpleasant sensation.

As I circle the car, something catches my eye and I grab the driver's shirt sleeve excitedly. "Look, look."

Parked in the lot, in the diminishing shade of the filling station, is a dusty flat-bed truck heaped high with bushel baskets of golden Georgia peaches. A big, leathery farmer reclines in a lawn chair close by, next to a sign that reads "Georgia Peaches! $20 a bushel." He seems to ignore the heat as he watches people come and go from under his trucker's cap.

"All that's missing is the front porch!" I joke.

The driver rolls his eyes and pulls away from me. "I'm gonna go pay for some gas. You better not wander. We've got a schedule to keep and I can't afford to wait on you."

As he heads inside to pay for our much-needed fuel, I approach the make-shift fruit stand in a slow, circuitous manner. I've never been much for talking to strangers, but the peaches are draw-

ing me in. I nudge a large chunk of gravel with my toe and allow it to lead me. I fawn and falter. Finally, under the pretense of stepping into the shade for relief from the heat, I near the truck and farmer. He's watching me with a bemused smile.

"These peaches don't bite, Miss." he drawls, somewhere between offended and entertained by my antics.

I select a peach from the pile and turn it over in my hand. The action leaves behind a coat of fuzz, which I wipe on my tank top.

"Where'd you get all these?" I ask reproachfully.

"I grow 'em."

"You grow them? Is it much fun?" The peaches are huge, not one I pick up is anywhere near as small as my fist.

The farmer shrugs, then pauses to consider for a moment. "Well, eatin' 'em is fun." He chuckles.

I lose my fear of the farmer as I get involved in examining the peaches. He goes back to watching the travelers pass as I search my bounty. I want only the biggest fruits, the ones that carry their weight just so, broad across and smiling like great harvest moons. I think about my parents and my grandmother, who are probably well ahead of us on this trip home; they would love to get a batch of peaches like this, especially Grandma. They would be so jealous!

I've already picked two and am looking for a third when my driver appears beside me, tapping his foot. "I want three," I tell him excitedly.

"Three what?" the farmer asks, grunting as he comes to his feet. He dusts his hands off as he walks over to us.

The driver and I reply in unison, "Peaches."

"I can't sell ya just three. Gotta buy a whole bushel, ya do."

"How many comes in a bushel?" I inquire.

"15."

"15!" I yelp, "We can't have 15 peaches. They'll spoil in the hot car before we reach home."

"Stop wasting the man's time," the driver barks impatiently in my direction. "When will you learn to grow up?" He turns and stalks back to the car. The gravel crunches deliberately beneath his heavy work boots.

The farmer removes his cap and smoothes his graying, sweat-soaked hair back against his scalp. He seems to be studying me now, and it occurs to me that he probably learns a great deal about people,

sitting there in his lawn chair watching them all day. I shift beneath his gaze.

"Just go on and take 'em, then," the farmer scratches his head as he speaks.

"I couldn't," I reply.

I shy away from the conversation, intending to replace the fruits I've selected and be on my way, but I hear the old man chuckle "Three peaches ain't gonna break my crop, little missy."

It seems a decision has been reached. I make my way back to the waiting SUV, my trio of fruits stuffed into a brown paper sack that the farmer has generously donated. The spiny gravel has begun to creep between my toes and I shimmy awkwardly to remove it. The inside of the SUV is so balmy it borders on tropical and I smile to myself. I climb into the passenger's seat this time. My driver is next to me.

He hits the gas and we haul away, back out onto the interstate and beyond.

Miles down the highway, I've taken to holding a peach out the window of our speeding SUV and dribbling some water from the bottle over it. "Sparkling Spring Water" the bottle read. I couldn't have cared less.

"I'm going to eat one now and then another when we reach the motel." I muse aloud. "Mom and Grandma will be sad to have missed out."

I sink my teeth into the first peach and it is exactly as it should be- sweet and tart and earthy. The taste curls the corners of my mouth into a smile only summer can bring. I prop my bare feet up on the dashboard in time for a globblet of peach flesh to land on my thigh. Wordless with joy I reach into the sack and produce another peach and offer it to my driver-friend with a pulpy grin.

His face betrays the tiniest smile. "No thanks. I don't need a peach."

Unable to convey it's goodness with words, I shook the fruit at him lightly, a mother trying to convince a toddler to eat.

Hesitantly, he takes it from me. He punches the cruise control and bites into the peach like a man learning to eat for the first time. A gush of fruity juice coats his chin, his shirt-front, his lap.

We laugh. The SUV tears down the highway. The sun dries the peach gunk on my leg to a sticky paste and everything is as it should be.

End

Rookie Mistake

Ryan Hayes

1.

It hurts to be shot.

It hurts a lot.

Don't let the suits fool you. Half of them haven't been, let alone witnessed the violence now.

I thought the sting and the pain wouldn't have lasted so long.

You get hit, you go down. Those ridiculous cop movies make me laugh even harder now, at least on the days when I can breathe comfortably.

Straight out of the academy, second month alone patrolling on the streets.

I briefly wonder if they could see it in me. In my expressions, my words, my actions, the way I was quick to draw my weapon. That slight bit of rookie fear and inexperience had to have shined as brightly as my badge. They don't seem to care about that badge as much any more though. They'll still kill you.

My mind is coming back now, I think. But then again, I don't know if I can trust it enough to tell me what really went down on that blistery cold night.

Suits and detectives filled my hospital room for what seemed like months. Puddles of water on the white tile floor glistened under the hospital lights. It was winter, like the middle of January, and even the snow wanted out of that frigid cold. I could see the flakes hanging onto the officers' shoelaces, coats, hats, whatever they could grab. Those little guys were willing to melt and die just to avoid the pain of a Midwest winter. I remember chuckling about that thought; actually it was probably just the painkillers

2

laughing. That hospital wasn't the ideal place to take shelter in though. The food was terrible. I should have savored every bite of that first solid meal once I regained consciousness, but it tasted like paper. Aromas of bleach filled the air day and night. I wanted to go home.

Doctors told me it was close, a close call with death. I never

saw any lights, or that gate, or even a long hallway. Just darkness till I awoke to the glowing halogen bulbs of the hospital. The bullet had entered through my back and just missed tearing through my heart. He was aiming for my head; it was a kill shot. He must have flinched.

Lots of blood lost; a lot of internal damage. When I was younger, my brother and I lost one of our best friends in a car accident. He died because of massive internal bleeding. No doubt, I felt lucky to be alive. Hell, I thanked God everyday that I survived that coward's gunshot. That first night I lied awake, I cried. Emotions were complicated.

"Hey Sullivan... Tony... Tony... c'mon man."

Those were the words I heard when I came to. I could recognize the voice. That slight Boston accent he couldn't get rid of even if he tried. You learn to distinguish other officers' voices rather quickly. Especially the guys you trust to watch your back everyday. Tommy's voice was an easy one.

"Wh... wha... where... where am I?" I managed to trickle out. My eyes felt like they were glued shut; my mouth was dry and stale.

3

"Don't talk," he half-whispered. "You were shot during that damn drug bust. They say you'll be okay, don't worry. The detectives will want to speak once they see you're awake, so relax."

"I... I... don't remember m...uch," I coughed.

"They want any info you got... just give 'em what you can," he started. "Shit, it looked bad there for a little while man. Docs didn't know if they could stop all the bleedin."

"Yeah?" I stammered.

"Yeah. Bastard shot you in the back and took off. We couldn't catch him."

"You're kidding, right?"

"Nah, they had a car waiting. The last asshole clubbed me in the back of my head after they shot you, knocked me out cold. Shit, I remember about as much as you."

"God damn it! Well... you hear how... how long I got in here?" I asked.

"A while, so get some rest."

Tommy left. I went back to sleep, still groggy. Within the next couple of days I told the officers everything I could remember about that night. I told them the one image that seemed crystal-clear to me: a red skull tattoo on the shooter's neck. That tattoo was a beacon of light in my otherwise clouded, foggy memory. I must have seen it once I had fallen to the ground. Anyways, the detectives assured me they would get him; cop killers were always brought to justice, one way or the other. That must have been the first time that thought entered my mind. 'Cop killer'. He had wanted me to die that night. Our

4

badges, that used to act as shields against these connected scumbags, were now bullet magnets. It took seven months till I was back on those neighborhood streets.

Painful rehabilitation in the hospital had created pockets of aggression throughout my body. These pockets would be popped open as soon as I got my questions answered. Six months of extremely painful rehabilitation, however, well, that made revenge the only thought on my mind. It was a hell of a motivator; docs said I made a full and quick recovery. I'd get him - he'd pay. It was just that either method of payment would be fine with me.

A buddy of mine in booking owed me a favor. Mug shots can't lie. Nothing could hide that red skull tattoo on his neck. The image had been burned into my brain for months. I found his file in a matter of seconds. Frank Scaletti. That was the shooter's name. Part of the Grenol crime syndicate. The dirtbag's record was filled with a few minor charges, possession and public intox as well as some major drug and battery arrests. He'd spent some years in the joint a while back. But that was a cakewalk as long as you were a "Grin"- any member of Grenol's organization. Prison couldn't rehabilitate these guys either. They got out and went back to work in the neighborhood. Professional criminals. Grins were good at what they did and they knew it. Police officers were just a nuisance and dealt with accordingly.

Department had a whole task force assigned to the Grenols. Members had really tight lips when it came to any info. Word around the department was that they had a few men in deep with the syn-

dicate. Their identities were kept confidential; that was the only

5

way they could survive. But that was always the message. Probably just bullshit to keep the suits at bay; the Grenols had a closed operation. Infiltration was almost impossible

So my intelligence came in slowly. Scaletti was working with Ed Vandita's crew. Vandita's men were low-to-upper level type losers. Probably ten to twelve guys. Mainly street pushers that could occasionally find themselves wrapped in a much larger deal. In some instances, these guys held the key to take down the whole syndicate; they were just too stupid to realize it. Higher-ups in the syndicate trusted Ed to run this group and essentially hold the men in-check. Vandita was their main connection to the streets; they respected him. Must have been why it was these losers we were trying to take down. They were the weak link in the chain that could break the entire chain.

But I had what I needed. Name, location, time frame, opportunity. I wanted this scumbag dead. I had stolen a handgun from one of these drug houses when I was in training. An older officer had quietly mentioned to me to swipe it in case I ever had to take care of any "personal business" without any tracks. Good advice; it would come in handy here. I'd make it look like some cracked-out angry customer snuck in the back and killed Frankie. Real quick, easy, simple. Just another dead gangster over a botched drug deal. Old news; no investigation, no worries.

The opportunity arrived quickly. Ed and four of his men would be taking care of a deal a few blocks north of their headquarters. Intel said Scaletti and maybe one other guy would be holding down the fort over on Elm Street. Officers planned to hit Vandita and his crew in the deal and shake-up the Grin's drug ring. That left me the perfect time frame to kill Scaletti and any other deadbeat that got in my way.

6

It was warm now. Summer. I pulled up two blocks south of the house and turned off my car. It was on foot from here. I checked the gun. Full clip, silencer on. I kept a low profile till I walked up to the back of the house. Dim light in the kitchen; television glow in the living room. One person sitting on the couch watching the television. That had to be Scaletti. It was almost too perfect. I quietly slid around to the back door and picked the simple lock. I

knew it would be this easy. No real security. This house was known in these neighborhoods. A Grin house. Any idiot crazy enough to fuck with Vandita, his men, this house, or their product would be eliminated. It wouldn't be pretty either. Grins made a disgusting example of their victims. What I was about to do could start a small war, but it didn't matter to me. It wouldn't be my war. Crime was a dirty business. It had consequences. Death was one of them.

I pulled the black ski mask over my face and drew the gun from the waistband of my jeans. I opened the door enough to slip inside. Good, the TV was loud. The kitchen was connected to the living room with just one open doorway. I paused and inched my way up to the right side of the door frame. A glance confirmed it was Scaletti; the red ink from that damn tattoo glowed in the TV light. He had his back to the kitchen while sitting on the couch. My mind raced.

HE deserved it. I had never killed someone. HE deserved it though. All the drugs he was selling, murders he had to have been involved in, and women he had beaten. I was doing it for those people, for the good of the community. This wasn't just for me. The whole God damn world would be a better place without this bastard. I don't have much time. He'll have a gun next to him; be careful, be quick. Just kill this asshole.

7

I whipped around the corner, gun up. I crawled up to the couch. Pressing the silencer up to the back of his brown wavy hair, my heart was ready to explode.

"Shhhhhhh... Frankie," I whispered. "Don't even reach for your damn gun."

"What the f...?" Scaletti stammered. He let a soft gasp escape his lips.

"You shouldn't have flinched, you scum. You should have put that bullet in the back of my skull."

"So it's the cop, eh? You that cop, right?"

"That's right asshole. Try and finish the job next time. Just some advice."

"God damn you're stupid," he coughed. "I knew you'd track me down. You're in way over your head here, rook. Put the gun down and walk away." He got up from the couch and turned around as he said it. I kept my gun on his head. This obviously wasn't the first time he had looked directly at his death.

"I know exactly what I'm doing," I laughed. It was a weird laugh, like a cackle. My mind and heart were racing.

"Well...got your mind made-up then, huh?" he chuckled. "But let me tell you one thing, rook...there was a reason I sparred ya son. You were just part of a bigger picture. It'll all make sense if you just let me have one last..."

And then he made a big mistake. He had a nervous rookie pointing a gun at his head. He shouldn't have reached for his pocket. This wasn't going to be like one of those movies where the man with the gun and the advantage loses the quick draw. I wasn't going to get shot again. I pulled the trigger twice and fired two bullets through his head. He dropped to the ground. He was dead. Shit, there's a lot of blood.

8

I checked his pockets and grabbed his wallet. No gun, you moron. What was he reaching for then? Ahh, it was just for a pack of cigarettes. Six left. But what is this? There was something stuck to the front inside panel of the pack. It looked like a small photo. Then it hit me like an atom bomb.

It was a fucking picture of his WIFE AND BABY GIRL! THIS was the department's deep undercover guy! I had killed one of OUR OFFICERS, a God damn decorated COP and family man! I felt faint; blood was rushing from my head. I collapsed on the floor next to him. That fucking skull looked like it was just mocking me now. OH MY GOD, WHAT THE HELL HAVE I DONE?

Scaletti couldn't tell me his situation but the picture would have explained it all. No thug carries that kind of photo with him. I couldn't have imagined how many times he must have looked at that picture to stop himself from going insane. That was his only connection to his real world. He wasn't reaching for a gun, it was for the God damn photo.

I didn't have much time to feel sorry for myself. At that moment, the second scumbag came out of the hallway bathroom, gun drawn. Shit, I had no chance. My pistol was out of reach. It was a rookie mistake; I never cleared the rest of the house. This thug didn't ask any questions either; he saw me and a dead Scaletti and put three bullets through my brain. I wouldn't have expected anything less from a Grin.

9

Slowly my memory of that night flows back into brain as the blood pours out onto the hardwood floor. All the memories of my life seem to be pushing and shoving their way through the newly formed holes in my skull.

Tommy and I were covering one of the back exits that cold January night. In the frigid cold, my radio had stopped working. I missed the command to stand down and let Vandita and his men escape. The deal apparently fell through and we had no evidence against them. I was supposed to disappear but instead I was hit in the face by the door as the thugs ran out. Scaletti had grabbed me and used me as a shield once Tommy pointed his sub-machine gun at them. Vandita's men slowly walked backward to the van with Tommy holding his aim on them. When they had reached the van, I remember Vandita yelling, "Kill the cop!" Scaletti was stuck in the toughest situation an undercover agent can face. He kicked the back of my knee causing me to fall and fired one shot into my back. He wasn't trying to kill me; he just wanted a flesh wound in my shoulder. I didn't fall fast enough and the bullet ended up going through my back. He had to have thought he killed me. Probably scared the shit out of him. But it was either to shoot me or receive a huge "RAT" stamp right on his forehead for Vandita to see. I would have made the same choice.

But he didn't deserve to die. He had much more to live for than I did. I'm sorry Frank. Revenge and pain had warped my mind into that of a psychotic killer. It's no excuse but it's the truth. Funny thing is, I accepted my death. I had become what I hated. Nothing but a criminal and a killer. I had to pay for what I had done. Our badges meant nothing now. God must have been a Grin.

End

Ring

Kristin Hannagan

In every Macy Oto film, there was a distinct bell sound.

It was her trademark, and Lucy and Gwen knew where every bell sound was in every movie. Whether it was totally obvious like the school bell in "The Sidewalk" or lightning fast like the bicycle bell chime in "Bright Lights at Night," the girls could point it out.

As soon as Lucy and Gwen heard on the radio that Macy's latest movie about a notorious 1950s girl gang would be filming 40 miles from home, they began planning for the big day. The movie was tentatively called "The Soda Shop Bandits." It would star an attractive but witty leading man as the sheriff and a cast of female newcomers as the gang members. They were determined to meet Macy and knew this could be their only chance to do so.

It made sense that the duo would attend a movie filming together as their love and appreciation of movies brought them together some 19 years ago. The youngsters were particularly smitten with "The Little Mermaid." Recess time in preschool was dedicated to recreating scenes from the movie, doing the best they could in a landlocked area with no possibility of meeting a singing crab or scheming octopus.

Nowadays the two made page-long lists of "must see" movies categorized by actor and genre. Movie release dates were marked on calendars and in planners the way most people kept track of anniversaries and birthdays. They were sacred days, something to look forward to.

Gwen immediately asked her internship adviser for the day off, giving her a two week notice. Gwen said she would appreciate having the day off being it was a once in a lifetime opportunity. She didn't mention the real reason she was going, thinking her adviser would think she was a star-crazed loon for standing outside all day. After carefully thinking about it, her adviser allowed her to take the day off. Gwen thanked her profusely, promising to be extra productive the next two weeks to make up for her absence.

Lucy was planning on calling in sick the night before, leaving just enough time for her boss at the sandwich shop to find someone to fill in her mid-morning shift. It served them right, she

thought, after scheduling her to work every weekend for the next month. Her only problem would be avoiding the co-workers she dubbed the "Hostile Hoochies" for their love of barely-there clothing, globs of makeup and unfriendly attitudes. They'd be there attempting to pounce on the leading actor, who already had a girlfriend and was known for his unwavering faithfulness to her. Her co-workers would be sure to show up looking like they used a paint roller to apply their makeup but didn't take the time to put their clothes on. Those who didn't know who they were would think the local exotic dance club was on strike.

Gwen and Lucy not only watched every film Macy directed (or produced or had the smallest role in) but also put together a portfolio of their works as undergrad film majors. It included a copy of their student film project from last semester, naturally modeled on one of Macy's works. It was a replica of Macy's own student film project about a boy with forks for hands. Finding someone willing to walk around with forks taped to their hands all day for a month was hard, but Jack's dedication to the role won Gwen's heart. The two began dating during filming, causing Lucy to have a fit. She claimed there was a conflict of interest being the co-director was dating the leading actor. Lucy got over it when the two won an award shaped like a bell for best direction from the film department's alumni association. Lucy broke her own rule a month later when she began dating Tony, the set designer for her and Gwen's next film assignment. They made a documentary about local parking lots, similar to Macy's documentary about the history of parking meters. Their film professor always urged them to think outside of the "Macy box" but they never listened.

After completing their portfolios, the two decided they had to dress like real directors. Gwen and Lucy scoured entertainment magazines and the Internet for ideas. Lucy hit the jackpot after finding the phone number for the store Macy's personal stylist owned. She wanted to give her a call, but Gwen worried they'd be arrested for stalking over the telephone. Lucy calmed Gwen down and dialed *67 along with the phone number making it a private call. After Lucy promised she was neither a stalker nor a member of the paparazzi, the clerk at the store forwarded her call to the owner. The stylist told Lucy she had been recently fired from her job because Macy decided store-bought clothing did not speak to her the way thrift store clothing did. The former stylist explained Macy

thought the personalities of the former wearers guided and directed her towards new routes of inspiration and she no longer needed someone to find outfits for her.

Lucy and Gwen searched high and low at every local thrift store, finding the only thing the clothing communicated to them was many people in the area had a terrible taste in clothing. They also had no idea they needed to wash the clothing before dropping them in the donation box. At one store, Gwen found the pockets of a black pair of pants had not been sewn shut but had wads of left-over gum stuck inside the pockets. A white linen dress Lucy found had a gigantic red Kool-Aid stain in the middle of the dress. After finding a vintage store in an upscale neighborhood, they found identical white button down shirts and black dress pants, just like the ones Macy recently wore to a film festival. After paying for their purchases, Gwen and Lucy knew they could have bought the exact same thing at the Target around the corner from school for a lot cheaper. They figured if it was good enough for Macy, it was good enough for them. Besides, Macy made millions per picture and they were stuck working minimum wage jobs until they graduated.

It was a long shot, they thought, but who knew. Maybe Macy would pick them out of the crowd and let them direct a scene or fetch her a coffee. And then maybe, they'd get the opportunity to slip her their resumes. Who knew, in ten years, they might be the first female directing team to win an Oscar.

Everyone thought they were crazy, from their film professor to their boyfriends. No one believed they would get to meet Macy, but no one wanted to crush their dreams. They nodded and smiled, wishing Gwen and Lucy the best, hoping the girls would not be disappointed if their dream did not come true.

Finally it was the big day. The girls were sitting on a blanket behind a flimsy plastic barricade across the street from the soda shop where an important scene took place after making the early morning drive. They made friends with some girls who camped out for days, hoping to catch a glimpse of the leading actor. Gwen and Lucy wouldn't deny he was part of the attraction of being there, but were mainly interested in watching Macy do what she did best: make thought-provoking films no matter the subject. Who else could have remade a classic movie about a doughnut maker and added a dynamic twist?

A church bell chimed in the distance, ringing nine times,

letting the crowd know they still had five hours until the rumored 2 p.m. start time. The two were smart enough to pack a lunch, even if it consisted of a box of Triscuits and some homemade chocolate chip cookies Gwen's mom made last night. They were not about to give up their front row seats, not even for food.

Gwen and Lucy could feel the excitement in the air of the thousand plus crowd. Clutching portfolios close to their chests, the two were careful not to wrinkle their crisp white button down shirts. Lucy relaxed a little, knowing she no longer had to worry about the "Hostile Hoochies" ruining her day. Earlier in the morning the group was escorted by the state troopers from the cast and crew only area. The trashy tramps were attempting to break into the leading actor's trailer when someone alerted a state trooper to the mishap. Lucy smiled a content smile, knowing she wouldn't have to deal with them at work for a while.

Rumor had it Macy was already in town, or so was the rumor ten minutes ago. There had been false sightings the entire morning. Someone claimed they saw her entering a local coffee shop wearing a bright pink and red striped jacket. Another person claimed they saw her at the mall last night getting her hair dyed blue, but this was coming from a man who could not name one of Macy's movies beyond the mainstream one two years ago.

Without warning, a silver Honda Civic sped around the corner and came to an abrupt stop in front of Gwen and Lucy. Out popped Macy with purple hair and a bright yellow pantsuit. Gwen and Lucy abandoned their plans of acting like professionals and began jumping up and down chanting Macy's name. Macy nodded in their general direction, providing the girls with an image they'd cherish for years to come. Macy waved to the rest of the crowd and skipped across the street into an open soda shop door.

For hours, Gwen and Lucy waited in the blazing sun, their neatly done curls beginning to droop, just like their spirts. Unfortunately they were just told Macy was only filming interior shots today. The only time the crowd would see some action would be watching extras walk back and forth from makeup and wardrobe trailers to the set. Bells chimed in the distance, causing hardcore Macy fans in the crowd to wonder if it was part of the filming or everyday noise in the town. A few debates went back and forth and the consensus was the latter.

The crowd began to thin out, separating those there to have

something to talk about around the water cooler the next morning from the diehard fans. No one had an idea when filming would stop. It was one of hundreds of locations in a five state radius, so everyone showed up just in case filming landed somewhere else in the morning.

A half-hour later it was just Lucy and Gwen waiting for a chance to meet their favorite director, who fifteen minutes earlier slipped out the back door of the shop.

Gwen knew it was time to start heading home. As much as she hated to admit it, pigs had a better chance of flying than the two had of meeting Macy. Gwen slowly turned to Lucy and asked her if she wanted to call it a day. Lucy looked at her as if she suggested misfiling a DVD on her meticulously organized movie shelf and began climbing over the flimsy barrier the guards had forgot to monitor for the last two hours.

Gwen knew crossing the barrier meant serious trouble. The rent-a-cop informed the crowd ten hours prior it meant a $1,000 fine and up to a year in jail. But she couldn't leave Lucy on her own. Once Lucy was determined to do something, she did it.

Gwen said a silent prayer and stepped over the barrier Lucy had clumsily knocked down in her haste. Lucy was already on the sidewalk across the street peering into a window where filming had gone on earlier in the day. Gwen crept up behind her and pleaded with her to hurry back across the street. Gwen said they were the only two out there and no one would notice if they headed back. Lucy ignored her friend and turned left towards the alley. Gwen followed, knowing each step meant one step closer to wearing a jail uniform similar to those movie extras walking around the set had on earlier in the afternoon. Only these would not be something you could take off later.

The two continued down the alley until reaching base camp for cast and crew members. The bowling alley parking lot was filled with 30 gleaming white trailers, making it seem as if a campground had magically appeared overnight.

Lucy strode with a purpose through the lot quickly recognizing Macy's trailer. Earlier in the month, a weblog dedicated to the filming of the movie posted a picture of Macy stepping out of her trailer with her bodyguard and a book about the gang's leader in her hand. Also in the picture was a bell-shaped windchime, the same windchime now playing in the breeze. Gwen knew some-

thing bad was going to happen as she watched Lucy knock on the trailer door.

Gwen ran up the side steps of the trailer deck, ducking behind a potted plant. The door opened and a befuddled Macy, in her robe and pajamas, let out a scream at the sight of an unfamiliar guest. Macy thought she had made it perfectly clear to the local and state law enforcement no one outside of the cast and crew was allowed near base camp unless they had special permission to be there.

A security guard three times larger than the rent-a-cop ran out of a black Jeep parked in the darkness outside of Macy's trailer and started walking towards Lucy. Gwen knew it was wrong, but became an accomplice to the crime as she pushed the plant at the guard. Lucy narrowly escaped his gigantic hand on her slender arm. Funny how a flimsy potted palm tree could take out a 300 pound man. The guard lay on the deck in desperate need of some pain medication and an ice pack to bring down the swelling of the gigantic bump on his head. He began a tirade of swear words, cursing the girl who woke him from his cat nap. As he reached for his cell phone to call the police, he knew his days of working for Macy were numbered. The last security guard was fired for failing to find Macy a rare albino squirrel for her last film, so he was certain this was his last day working security for Tinseltown's elite.

Gwen and Lucy ran through base camp and down the nearest street, knowing freedom was beginning to be a distant memory. Both noticed they dropped their resumes, knowing two girls on the run and two resumes would add up soon, even in a town known for their police force who couldn't find their way out of a paper bag.

The two continued running down the street, only stopping momentarily to ditch their uncomfortable dress shoes and socks. As the two ran towards a nearby field, they heard the slam of squad car doors and knew they had to do something quick.

Lucy fell and pulled Gwen down with her. The two found themselves caked in mud, compliments of the muddy ditch Lucy pulled them into. Lucy muttered something rhyming with the place they found themselves in, knowing something unpleasant was going to happen soon.

The huffing and puffing of the overweight police officers running towards them was getting louder. Gwen and Lucy knew their time was up.

The policemen stopped outside of the ditch and shined flash-

lights brightly on Gwen and Lucy's faces. The two had no option but surrender. The police hoisted them out of the ditch and quickly cuffed them while reading them their rights.

Though the police station was only two blocks away, it was the longest car ride ever. Gwen knew she should have let Lucy face the music by herself, but their strong friendship made her reconsider, even if the evening resulted in a free cop car ride and hair full of mud.

The two were quickly booked and given one phone call apiece. Each called their mother and arranged for bail money. The moms would be there in three hours with the money, even though it was an hour drive from home. Gwen and Lucy decided their mothers allotted an hour for travel time and two hours to teach them a lesson.

The girls sat on the cold metal bench in their damp cell, hoping time would speed up. Lucy knew she was indebted to her friend, who until this evening had a spotless record with the law. They were also thankful it was a slow night at the station, otherwise they might be sharing a cell with a real convicted felon.

The two suddenly laughed, momentarily waking the night guard. He muttered something about stupid Hollywood and stupid girls. Perhaps one day Lucy and Gwen could laugh about their adventure for hours, and maybe even make a movie about it. Getting Macy to make a cameo would be difficult, since a police officer told them to expect Macy to file a restraining order against them.

Shivering in their cell and using each others shoulders as a pillow, the two began to drift off to sleep. They both had dreams about shoes and socks, wishing they'd magically appear on their freezing bare feet.

A bell rang in the distance, letting the girls know they still had two hours until they would be set free. Just like in the prison scene from "Lucky Window."

End

Poetry

Final Fall

George Fountoulakis

Clouds conceal crystalline cargo—
A company of singular, unique paratroopers.

Blinding brigade,
Aspire to stick,
Silently settle.

Soldiers, cold demeanor, demoralize blades, invade green landscapes,
Using suffocating powder, packed, layered to relieve heat.

First raid brings magnificent untouched whiteness,
Children form unassuming angels,
Others shape ivory orbs –
Three decreasing spheres, one golden nose, two piercing ebony eyes.

Peace fades as
Footsteps, shovels, plows
Disturb platoons.

Cavalry clears infestations,
Routines recommence,
Fallen foes lie unappreciated.
Pure become contaminated, salty destruction,
Massive heaps.

Fleeting few linger intact on lofted rooftops,
Riding winds form banks of winter.

Cascading sands bring spring,
Sending soldiers skyward,
Others under-earth-bound,
Vaporizing, incinerating, decomposing.

Will such cycles continue?
Perhaps new Ages approach
Where we witness complete usurpation.

First flakes seem a faint memory,
Even forgotten, only to
Leave us pondering
Survival.

Every Winter

Michael Tolliver

I get asked the same question every winter.
"Aren't you cold wearing shorts in this weather?"
People look at me like I have lights and sirens going off on my body.
Is it really that big of a deal people?
I try to come up with a different comeback each time.
"No way! I put pants on this morning but those damn pixies must have stolen them."
Does it bother you so much that you have to ask me?
I don't ask you why you put so much makeup on.
Do I look that stupid to you?
Maybe there is a reason I wear shorts when it's cold out.
"Wow, its cold outside but I refuse to abandon my shorts!"
Maybe I wear shorts to show winter I am not impressed with it.
"I'm not afraid of you, bring it on you cold, everlasting jerk!"
Do you still want to know why I wear shorts all winter?
I'm not cold. If I was, I'd put long pants on. There, Happy?

Ragged

Linda Milom

Ragged

Always whispering and staring as I walk by
They scrunch their faces up in disgust
Noses reaching for the clouds
how do they walk straight?
do they not fall?

Ragged

Untaught children remark aloud
Teenagers with no respect
Aloud they cry – filth, poor, and dirty trash
Whispers always following behind

Ragged

my head hangs low
eyes drawn to the holes in my jeans
i count each sidewalk crevice – 37
A rectangular tin – empty
A reminder of the Spam I last ate
The taste still left over

Ragged

a quick glance up
Laughing in disgust
i turn my attention back to the sidewalk – 73

- Peaceful, safe, and predictable

NonFiction

Naked Peart

Joe Hayes

I scanned from chapter to chapter hoping to retain as much information from the text for the test on the following day. My phone rang and I gazed at the screen to see who was calling me this late. The screen flashed the name Peart.

"Traep Nation, what's the word?" I answered the phone knowing he had something important to talk about. Traep Nation is a personal nickname for Peart.

"Will you be naked?" Peart chuckled as he struggled to pronounce his final syllable.

"Yes." I answered immediately. I didn't know what he was talking about but I obliged.

"Yes! Oh man yes!" Peart's chuckle became a roar of maniacal laughter.

"Are you being serious?" I interrupted with a bit of concern in my voice.

"Yeah, I have to make a music visualization for my television production class and the leading character in the scene needs to be naked. I haven't asked my teacher about the idea yet, but I assume she'll be fine with it." He said as his voice changed from hilarity to serious.

"Yes, I would like to be naked for you." I chuckled. "Just let me know what is going on and when you want to see me naked. " We laughed together.

"I'll tell you more about it at lunch tomorrow. I just needed to call and see if you were comfortable being...in the nude" he said giggling between words.

"Right on man, I'm down. You know my style." I stated confidently. "Well I got a test to study for, so I'll talk to you tomorrow. Later Peart."

He answered me in a dense laughter choking on each chuckle. "Bye."

I thought to myself about being naked. The idea lingered long and hard in my mind, until I decided it was no good. At the same time I thought what an amazing story this will be. I imagined myself in a television studio highlighted by the gloom from the ceiling and the over populated eyes in the room. My naked body would be

disposed to the public revealing every speck of skin. I entered my bathroom like every morning, but this time in the middle of the night. I stripped my clothes entirely like every morning before a shower, but this time there was no shower. The mirror reflected my true form, petite in size and shape. Disappointment showered my cold body. There was a time when I exercised and lifted weights, and I was happy with how I looked. Now I noticed my chest had lost its size, my stomach had lost its tone. Spring was on its edge and summer was staring me in the face. It had always been a priority to get into shape before the warm weather melted away my clothes. I pulled my underwear back towards my waist and ran back to my room to avoid as much of the chill that waited my exit from the bathroom. My focus drifted from my studies over to the idea of my naked body being broadcasted around the world.

Peart called me Thursday, a couple of days later, to inform me of the wonderful news. In two weeks I was to stand bare, in front of a camera, under the watchful eye of my friend, his classmates, and his teacher. I began my preparation. I consulted with a dear friend, Brennan, and choose my routine for the coming weeks prior to the music visualization. Fourteen days remained until the premier showing of my penis to the world.

"I want to look good naked!" I approached Brennan eagerly, knowingly stealing Kevin Spacey's line from the movie American Beauty.

"I can do that," Brennan answered back, nodding to show his approval of my thievery.

Brennan earned a warm spot in my heart. Older and wiser than I, he stood well over six feet tall and was built like a mountain. Broad shoulders, muscles rippling like water, he did well at being a man. One interest we shared was our love for pop culture. He was always wonderful at spouting various lines from movies or simply breaking into chorus to win me over in song. He had been a man of fitness almost all of his life. He would make me beautiful.

It was imperative to start a diet. I needed to eat 4-6 meals a day. Small in portions, I ate egg whites in the morning and chicken breasts for the rest of the day that followed. Every other day I could throw in a yolk or really spoil myself with a one hundred calorie snack pack. I needed to gobble down as much protein as possible with only the assistance of water as my beverage. In the final days before the music visualization, the water would be cut out com-

pletely, creating a vacuum between my skin and muscles.

Diet is only half the fight; I needed to work out as well. I was familiar with pumping up the jams, not muscles, and the transition proved to be grueling. I ran every day, delivering a surge of pain to my calves the following mornings. I also hit the weights. I used free weights, mainly dumbbells assisted by pull-ups and push-ups. Yes it was all coming together quite nicely. I hated running and quit my diet after only four days.

I decided to revise my diet. I added bread and switched from beer to light beer. I had never been on a diet before; I had only tried to gain weight, to gain muscle. I was forbidden to drink wine, eat cookies, chips, beef, and cake. I was allowed only one table spoon of peanut butter a day, so I decided to quit eating healthy food. I ate what I wanted and stopped running for whatever reason I could imagine. I used the rain, my shoes, the dog's jealousy, whatever reason I could fathom to not go for an early morning jog.

In the midst of all this dieting and exercising I failed to consider the condition of my male member. Formally known as my Penis, for this story I will call him Percy EdgarNuggets the 15th. When abbreviated his name is PEN15 which looks identical to the word penis. But to avoid my penis sounding like a robot, PEN15, the name Percy will do just fine. Percy was really of no concern until the final days before the production. I was constantly reminded by myself of the late Seinfeld episode which pioneered the term "shrinkage". When defined in the dictionary, shrinkage is a noun often referred to as the shrinking of something or the decrease in value of something. In my situation, both meanings would apply.

There were two days left until the production and we wanted to do a rehearsal. We decided it suitable to leave my underwear on for the comfort of our dear friend Willy. Peart and I insisted that my body be completely exposed, but Willy found it unnecessary to meet Percy face to face. We were not able to get together with any of the other people involved in the scene so we did our best to create the actual production. I bounced around in my underwear shaking off any nerves. I jumped up and down while twisting at the hips. My arms were placed strategically as far away from each other to maintain an excellent status of balance to perfect my dance. I knew we could not make any mistakes. This was Peart's largest grade for his class and I wanted my naked body to sparkle.

Peart called me the morning of, to make sure I was on my way

to the school. It was in the Porter building, in the media studio, where I met the world of television. Peart wanted me there early so we could rehearse the scene. I had yet to meet the other people involved in his project and was eager to see who would be joining me on my naked adventure.

There were thirteen total in his class excluding his teacher. Two people were also actors in the scene, a boy named Josh and a woman named Amy. Neither of these two people was required to be naked. Amy expelled an effortless grace. She was attractive, smart, and fun. She knew about seriousness and that's why she handled my underwear. Josh's joking demeanor made him an instant friend. We laughed together on the set as his gentle touch relaxed my rattling body. The studio was chaotic with excitement. People were running back and forth testing lights, prepping cameras, and doing sound checks. It was a large room plastered with lights. The floor was bare except for the countless cold footprints of the students. The room suffered in 50 degree weather and I with it. We rehearsed as much as we could. It went well, not perfect, but we ran short of time and the teacher was due into the studio at any moment. Amy was very professional, Josh had good spirit, and we all had plenty of giggles.

The teacher entered the class and performed her professionalism. Very determined, she demonstrated her success very well. Each student would be graded on their performance that day as a director. She was respected by everyone in the room and her energy glowed in their eyes. I was very impressed with how she handled her class.

"Hello, I'm Michelle." She said as she shook my hand firmly.

"I'm Joe; it is very nice to meet you. Peart tells me how much he enjoys you as his teacher." I stated hoping to create a friendly conversation.

"Well Peart is a wonderful student, I'm very proud of his and the other students' achievements this semester." She told me with delight. "Would you like to join me in the control room as the students prepare for their projects?"

"That would be great." I answered eagerly.

Michelle allowed me to witness some of the other students' projects from the control room, where the directors performed. Here I witnessed her intensity as she guided the directors when it was needed. The control room was built on nerves; voices stuttered,

limbs were shaking, the tendencies of the other students were contagious.

It came time to perform Peart's music visualization. This was considered a live broadcast, even though nobody would see it besides those in the room. We had twenty minutes which amounted to about three takes. There could not be an error in the production; otherwise we needed to do another take. There would be no cuts and no editing. I stood ready, behind a black suede coat wearing only black nylon socks waiting for my cue to enter the scene. My body trembled and I felt indisposed.

I heard the countdown from five and released the coat at two. The music sounded and I entered the scene. My black socks lead the way towards camera one. I strapped a smile on my face and strutted across a cold cement floor to address a fake audience with my happiness. I wanted to feel comfortable and relaxed, so I thought about flying a kite. Running naked down a hill of green, string in my hand, I imagined a flight of majesty and luster. A calm sensation suddenly flowered in my body as I stepped into the light.

I centered myself in front of the camera pinpointed by the magic eye of Liz, the camera operator. Below me huddled in an Indian style position, sat a beautiful young woman directing a light towards my exposed exotic area. Josh stood to my right, Amy to my left, and I in between them alone in my socks. I felt happy until Amy stepped towards my naked limb with a pair of fresh white underwear. She headed towards my erogenous zone in a zealous fashion. I looked at her in disgust as she placed me into the pair of cotton boxer briefs. Little Percy retreated back into his pocket of comfort in a sullen state.

Upon Amy's doing, Josh placed each of my legs back into my pants. Why were they doing this to me? What had I done to deserve this? Each article of clothing placed upon me fueled my anger towards them. They continued to dress me until I was fitted into a business suit. The tie grasped firmly around my neck and a jacket buttoned together to completely conceal my previously desolate body.

I felt as though I could not breathe. The tie restricted my airflow and the suit was fastened too tight. Anxiety poured from my armpits. I heard the word "Perfection" as the song played on and I felt a societal eye watching me, commanding me. My eyes danced back and forth as sweat trickled past my brow. I heard whispers

pecking at my eardrums. I saw worms tying me down like the ropes of life. I twisted, squirmed, and struggled to tear the suit from my body.

I began clawing at my tie and felt the grip of Josh's Paw at my shoulder. He shook his head at me as I beat his hand away. Amy wrapped her hands around my neck and straightened my tie. I ripped her hands away and frantically struggled with the buttons on my shirt. With each button I undid, Josh was there to fasten it. Amy straightened my cuffs; Josh tucked in my shirt. My agitation grew into rage and I exploded like a young boy's pubertal journey into adolescence.

Josh and Amy flew out of the scene from my thunderous blow. When the camera found me again, I was naked. I felt the restrictions of life wash away as I peeled the clothes off of my body. I was truly happy and it showed on my face. I smiled and flirted with the camera performing gleefully for my audience as the music faded out.

End

The Cell

Krystle Krucek

My home is located in a beautiful, black stadium on the South Side of Chicago. There are towering buildings in the distance, which makes for a breath-taking backdrop. There are great, powerful lights that ignite the black sky. This is where I belong.

A few times a week, during the season of course, thousands of members of my family gather for a common reason: to see our team. Beer is drank and breaths are held. If we're lucky, there will be fireworks.

It's important to note that it's not only our team that my family loves. It's our home – the stadium in which we all come together. Its dark exterior is surprisingly inviting, adorned with pennants and lights. Then there's the banner that has the most significance to everyone, of any age. It happened in 2005 and it will never be forgotten. That banner hangs as a sign of perfection. What happened that year is what we strive for every year – "win, or die trying," as we say.

Walking though the entrance gate is mesmerizing. Oftentimes I have to remind myself to breathe. We're all so taken aback by the beauty of this glorious field that is before us. The green grass is almost too perfect – every blade in uniform, like a group of soldiers awaiting battle in exact alignment. It looks like it's been taken out of a fairytale rather than being real. The color is bright and clean. We wouldn't have it any other way.

Inside, we truly know why Chicago is called the "windy city". In the stadium and throughout the city, people are continuously moving. Not a moment goes by where you're not surrounded by people. It's impossible to be alone here. True fans know that Chicago isn't called the "windy city" because of the actual wind – but because of the great crowds of people.

The smell, the beautiful smell of our house. You know how the smell of your house makes you truly feel at home and comfortable? And even when you're not at home, and a familiar aroma tickles your nose – you're relaxed. Like for that moment, all the worries of the day disappear and all that encompasses your mind is your family and how you feel when you're with them.

That's what we feel the moment we first inhale upon enter-

ing. The smell of freshly cut grass overpowers our senses. The faint smell of juicy hotdogs lingers and grows stronger with time. The initial aroma from chopped onions pierces us and our eyes begin to twinkle with tears. But we don't mind, the tear producing scent fills our nose and we get the feeling of complete calmness.

Do you see the two blue seats that stand out from the sea of green ones? That's where, in 2005, two of our star players blasted homeruns to win the World Series. Those chairs are there to commemorate those two moments that will forever be imbedded in our minds. The two moments that forever changed our family for the better - we never stopped believing.

It is April and our pride and joy have just begun their season. The chill of winter still lingers, but our spirits are already in full bloom. A long awaited voice brings silence to the crowd. We obey his command and stand. The silence is soon broken with a roar of applause.

The game begins and chills run down our spines. Everyone in my family has their favorites; screaming their names and hoping for something magical to happen. When the small white baseball makes contact with the wooden bat at just the right moment, it soars through the spring air and races to the ivy covered fence.

The nine innings that are played keep our attention. Our eyes are fixed on the field as our team makes us proud. The third baseman, number 24, has the most amazing mitt. It's as if the ball is magnetically attracted to it. Nothing gets by him.

Then there's our power hitter, number 14. Rarely does he disappoint us. He stands at the plate in a powerful, intimidating way. He swings the bat and makes it look effortless. Soon the ball flies over the fence and we hear the announcers preach: "you can put it on the board – yesss!" We cheer and get goose bumps from excitement.

The rest of our boys are also great. Who doesn't think the best of their family? They make us proud every day. "The good guys," as they're referred to, truly live up to their name: making a game winning diving catch or hitting that much-needed RBI. Each one has proven themselves to us time and time again.

We explain the physical features of the stadium parallel to the players, because they are indeed part of this place. They make it come alive. Without them, it would only be a grand stadium.

Don't get us started on the opposing team; they are the en-

emy. We respect their family for coming out and supporting them, just as we do. But our reason for being there is to win. They're trying to take that away from us. We'll do whatever it takes to stop that from happening.

When the game is over we leave with the same feeling that we arrived with: the unexplainable feeling of wholeness. Of course, we're not an actual family in the literal sense of the word, but we might as well be. For in those three hours that we spend together, we're all there for a common reason. We feel the same things, we cheer for the same team. That, to us, is so much more than a group of complete strangers.

Those towering buildings that I talked about earlier – driving home and looking out the back window of the car, those same buildings are there. They know we'll be back, and we know that every time we return to the South Side of Chicago, they'll be there too, igniting the black sky and our hearts.

End

The Art of Giving Up

Lauren Comer

September 4, 9:15pm

The halogen streetlights streak the interior of the car with dirty gold as we drive away from the packed cafe, and I look sideways and watch the way the light and shadow play across Ray's face as the car accelerates.

My legs are stiff, cramped from keeping them straight and to myself, because Ray's so close that relaxing would mean I'd be pressed up flush against him and I'm not sure if he'd be okay with that, and I'm terrified or rejection, and I'm terrified of - everything, really.

The last song that the band played runs through my brain and I stare at the back of Matthew's head against the seat in front of me, red hair spiky and gelled above the grey upholstery, and I try to forget how close Ray stood to me, how I could feel his breath move my hair as he sang along. I try to forget these things because I'm not sure I can be responsible for my actions if I remember.

I don't know what it is about him; by all accounts he is skinny and scrawny and his hairline recedes further back than most middle-aged men I've seen. I don't know what it is about him that makes me feel like he can fix everything that's wrong with me, if it's something in his gold-flecked brown eyes, huge behind wire-rimmed glasses, or the awkward grace that he carries himself with. I don't know what it is that makes my heart thump and my hands grow clammy, slippery, when I look at him, even now, even though we have been friends for almost a year already. I don't know what it is, but I have the sinking suspicion that it isn't going away any time soon.

I tap my fingers absently on my knee, the knee pressed up against the door, safe distance, because I know I can't trust myself to keep my hands away from the rough texture of his jeans, and I don't think it'd be a good idea to let him know, not that way, at least. Not now, not with Ashley on the other side of him and his eyes locked sideways on her profile.

I wonder, my fingers tapping harder, biting into my leg with each beat, if Ashley realizes the way his gaze follows her whenever she moves, if she realizes the upward glance through eyelashes that

he does when she's sitting still, obvious to everyone but her.

Red light, and the car slows down. The rhythm I'm tapping out on my knee falters when I catch Ray's smile out of the corner of my eye, red lips curved quietly upwards, and I wonder, briefly, what it would look like if he were smiling full-on at me like that.

::

November 16, 7:20pm

"I'm growing my hair out," Ray says, his voice tinny and hollow over the phone. I smile and curl my fingers tighter over the receiver and wait for him to continue, and I wonder how long it could possibly have grown in the three days I haven't seen him. I wonder if he's told Ashley this, because Ashley's been on him to grow his hair out too, wonder if that's the impetus in the first place.

"It's just sort of," he pauses, and I hear a clattering noise in the background, like pots and pans falling on the kitchen floor, and then a little snort of embarrassed laughter, "poofing out. It's not doing anything." He pauses again, and then, quieter, "Man, Ashley's going to go crazy."

"Well," I say, and I giggle, not because anything is funny but because I am impossibly nervous, "well, you're just going to have to grow it longer and see what happens, aren't you." I wonder if Ashley is going to be lurking behind every one of our conversations and if that's really entirely Ashley's fault.

"You're evil," he says, and I can hear the smile in his voice. "It's just going to 'fro out. You should've seen me when I woke up today, it was crazy."

Something clenches in the pit of my stomach and I have to bite my tongue to keep back I wish I could have. I laugh again instead, and hope it sounds breezy instead of forced. I hate the idea that this might be what's going to happen every time we talk, me trying to keep in things I shouldn't say because it might mess things up irrevocably, and I feel the corners of my mouth tug down and I hate it, because it's just a stupid conversation anyway, a conversation about nothing, and I shouldn't be getting all -

"You laugh a lot, you know," he says abruptly, and I feel the phone slide in my grasp a little.

"I'm sorry," I say, and then, unbidden, a tiny giggle slips out and I sigh inwardly, slamming my other hand down hard on my thigh, squeezing my eyes shut tight.

Your friend, I remind himself, he's your friend.

"No," he says, and I let my eyes slide open, bottom lip between my teeth, "no, it's okay." He laughs a little too, and whether it's in sympathy or if it's him mocking me, I don't know, don't care, because he said it was okay and so it's okay, for the moment, for now.

I smile hugely and manage to hold back the burst of relieved laughter, genuine laughter that, for once, I'd like to let out, and I settle for a calm, quiet, "well, okay."

When we finally hang up, I can't keep the laughter from bubbling forth, and whether I'm laughing still in relief or laughing at myself for even thinking maybe, I have no idea, but I think it might be both.

I remember, abruptly, the way he said Ashley's name, and I have a feeling this is going to end badly no matter how much maybe I convince myself might be there.

::

December 21, 2:30am

I jump over the back of the couch headfirst, smile at the way the already-broken springs squeak and curve, and rub my hands together in a vain effort to get some feeling back into them. The basement feels something like heaven after the cold, and for a minute or two I'm content to sit almost perfectly still and let the warmth press against me, go through me, permeate my skin.

Matthew comes down the stairs, his face obscured with a pile of blankets, and he tosses them on top of me, burying me in fleece and cotton and itchy wool, and I can hear him laugh even through the layers of fabric.

"Hate you," I mutter, and then pull the blankets down so I can see. I glance across the room at Ray, who's poking aimlessly at the fireplace, where only a few halfhearted flames are left flickering. "Are you going to start that up again?" I ask, and when he turns I have to keep myself from gasping a little, because even in the dying firelight he glows, and I think, I thought I was over this. I think, this was supposed to end already.

"Trying," he says, and turns back, nudging the embers, and I think, so am I.

"It isn't going to work," Ashley says, curled up in blankets on the floor, and I can't help noticing the way his back straightens the slightest bit at her voice.

Matthew kneels in front of the television, flicks buttons in

the half-darkness, then utters a little triumphant noise when the screen switches from late-night infomercials to the display screen of his PlayStation, a pixelated tableau of shooting stars and airplanes, when instead of hack merchants hawking their wares there comes the faint sound of music.

The first sparse, lonely guitar chords strain through the television speakers, and then it's broken by the clattering sound of metal on stone, and I look up to see Ray shove his hands in his pockets with a frown, the fire-poker abandoned on the hearth.

"It isn't going to work," he echoes, and I wonder what he's really talking about. I watch as the last of the embers burns out, watch as the Christmas tree in the corner of the room becomes the only source of light, other than the television, which casts a sickly blue gaze over everything.

Matthew jumps onto the couch, stretches out full-length so there's no more room, and for whatever reason, Ray bypasses him, bypasses the floor, and sits next to me, the springs squeaking in protest as he shifts his weight.

Silence settles over us, broken only by the slightly nasal whine of the lead singer's voice, by the hollow sound of home-recorded acoustic guitars dubbed over keyboards that threaten to dominate the music. I cast my mind back to that concert, so many months ago – or, at least, that's what it feels like; it feels like forever when really, it's barely been any time at all – and I wonder if this is ever, ever going to end.

I form the words noiselessly along with the songs, words about lost love and sadness and things beyond reach, and out of the corner of my eye I can see Ray doing the same thing. After a moment of deliberation I decide it's dark enough to hide my gaze and I turn, just a little, and look at him directly. I watch the way the Christmas lights reflect backwards in his eyes, tiny points of red and green and yellow, and I watch the way he keeps his gaze above and just to the right of where Ashley is laying, subtle but not nearly enough.

It isn't going to work, I think, and the realization hits hard enough to knock the wind out of me, almost, and I'm thankful that the room is dark enough to hide the tears that slip out like traitors.

End

Kelly

Greg Rucinski

As a shy, quiet, introverted kid my entire life, I never had the luck with the women. I had never approached women before (and still rarely do), I never even kissed a girl before the age of 21. I never dated in high school. I've never had a relationship before and wasn't sure of how to act in one at all. Imagine Steve Carrel's character in "The 40 Year Old Virgin", but half the age, and you have me. I had always joked about needing to find a girl with low self-esteem, drinking problems, and loads of self-hatred. I look back at my relationship with my first girlfriend ever, Kelly, and I realize just how unfunny that joke is now.

We had met at work, waiting tables, like many doomed romances. We had quickly bonded over our favorite pastime at the time, smoking marijuana. She had been overtly friendly to me during her shifts, which made me more nervous than I'd like to admit. Pressuring me for a constant burn cruise (for the non-stoners, a burn cruise is where you simply drive around, smoking marijuana, preferably with some Pink Floyd on the radio), I was reluctant and hesitant. You would be too, if you were me.

She was 24 years old and a teacher of autistic kids, still in college for her masters and aggressively proud of that. She was adorable in the face, cute but not too cute. She was a bit shy and coy, but I learned through the conversations on our first ever out together as friends that there was a repressed sorority wild child girl inside. Her body was great, slim with a nice rack and a great ass and legs. All of this, and she was pursuing me, not the other way around. This was new.

That first night where we went out and smoked was arguably my first date I've ever had. We went on a burn cruise and out to eat, a classic stoner combination. She was so charming and funny, and the big geek inside of her completely began to win me over. I had found a shy, slightly introverted stoner chick with a great body that was interested in me. Me! Something wasn't right here... and I learned it that night.

When we were going our separate ways, we sat and relaxed in the car a bit. I told her I was going home, she called me a "chicken shit", playfully, of course. I feigned ignorance out of my fear and

nervousness, told her I'd see her tomorrow, and left. When I got home, she instant messaged me and chided me for not taking chances, obviously referring to my lack of kissing her. We had playfully gone back and forth, during that conversation I learned that she had one of my old favorite cartoons, Gargoyles, on DVD as well as vast collection of Super Nintendo games. She was getting more and more perfect, and then she started talking to me about her problems.

There was a vast lack of self-esteem in her physical appearance. All girls are like that, I know, but when you go days without eating as she did, there's a problem there. I learned about alcoholism in her family and how, as a child, she had to hide in the closet from her abusive drunken uncle who lived with her at the time. She was a workaholic, with her job and classes being by far the most important thing to her. She was extremely proud in her knowledge and her skill set and never, ever ceased to let you know somehow, someway, she was smarter than you. She made up for the lack of self-esteem physically with a great arrogance in regards to her knowledge and an absurd amount of passive-aggressive behavior. But that's okay, right? Nobody is perfect. God knows I'm not.

This passive-aggressive behavior would come out at work, along with the arrogance. She thought she was better and more intelligent than the rest of the waiters at the restaurant. She had told me that, talking negatively about people I had known and loved for at least a year. When we had first reached boyfriend/girlfriend status (marked by the first night we made out), the passive-aggressive behavior she was displaying started to become more noticeable. Knowing that I had never had a relationship before, she didn't hesitate to throw me the more common relationship pitfalls and problems, such as the classic "Nothing's wrong, I'm fine" through grated, angry teeth. And there I was, eager to please and pick up the check at the end of the night and buy her the movie tickets to the movie that she often picked out. I was happy as a clam, though, because she was mine. I wasn't sure how to act, so pleasing her became the most important thing to me. It was getting more and more difficult as time went on.

She wasn't there. She was distracted. One horrible date night had her gloomy, moody, and near tears without telling me what's wrong. We ate dinner in frustrating silence when all I wanted to do was help. It was awkward and uncomfortable, and I couldn't do a damn thing about it and I was just having such a fundamental prob-

lem with understanding why she wouldn't talk to me! I thought that was the thing that boyfriends and girlfriends do! Talk about their problems!

She had less and less time for me. She let it slip during a conversation that her sister thought that she could do better than me. I brought up how a girl in my classes at the time was suddenly flirting with me, but then had to take a sick leave due to her finding out midway through the semester that she had cancer. What Kelly said next is by far, the best way of explaining how our relationship worked:

"You sure she has cancer? Maybe she just doesn't like you and want you off her back?"

To this day, the effect that those few sentences had on me still impacts me, because I cannot look at the girl in question now without wondering if she's lying to me and wanted me off her back. Those few sentences have still hurt me. I cannot believe, to this day, a girl when she says that she has plans or an excuse not to hang with me. The sick thing was that Kelly knew exactly what those sentences would do to me and the harm they would have on my self-esteem. She was, after all, the smartest person in the room.

I'll never forget my first Valentine's Day with her. I went to the Texas Corral with a card and a gram of weed for her as a present. She got me nothing. Not a card, not a present, nothing. She was moody that night, too. Put yourself in my shoes for a second: the first Valentine's Day I could celebrate with a girl and she didn't get me a damn thing. How would you feel if she ordered the most expensive thing on the menu, ate very little of it, yet ordered dessert? That's exactly what she did.

Last year, Super Bowl Sunday, she gave me the "It's not you, it's me" speech, which everyone knows the subtext to. Letting me down easy, right? She said something about classes and work eating up all her time, urging me to go try for new girls while she tried to get things together in her life. I believed it at the time, but I see the inherent bullshit of what she was feeding me now.

I was hurt, but I started flirting more at work with other women. I was feeling slightly more confident. When Kelly saw me flirt, she wasn't pleased. She became rude and hurtful, saying things like "Why are you flirting with them, they're not good enough for you", just anything to screw with me. Her passive-aggressive behavior, arrogance, and attitude got worse during this time. I wanted

to remain friends, but with her sending mixed signals of jealousy with my flirting, I didn't know what to do. Was this common for relationships? Did Kelly really want me to pursue other options? I didn't want to be with someone else and lose her when she was ready and able to have me in her life. Then again, I couldn't understand why a 24 year old teacher would play such childish relationship games. I wanted her back because the thought of finding another girl that would have pursued me like she did was simply not possible, I knew that to be scientific fact at the time.

I was confused, annoyed, jealous, lonely, and hurt. I wanted to be with her. I didn't think I could meet a girl that had the combination of my similar interests and great body outside of her. I wanted my relationship with my first girlfriend to last more than a month. Even with her arrogance towards my friends at work and her attitude, I wanted her because she was my first girlfriend.

Work became a place associated with confusion, anxiousness, and loneliness. She kept asking me why I didn't have a new girl yet, but she reminded me often that I had been flirting with many of them at work. I asked her what could be done to improve my general appearance and she went through in meticulous, hurtful detail ("You could stand to shave your back and lose some weight") everything that looked wrong about me. I wasn't expecting to be brutally put down like that.

Thankfully, her arrogance and attitude caused conflicts with management. In a final burst of anger with a manager who was practically the male version of herself, arrogance and all, she walked out. She wanted me to come with her. I told her no, she said that she would call me when I got off.

The entire night, I waited and considered what to do. She was out of my life for that moment, I never had to see her again, but if I answered the phone when she called, I knew I would be letting her negative being into my life again. Was that really worth it? Was the pain, the confusion and uncertainty worth the chance of having her back?

When she called, I ignored her. I texted her with "Do not contact me, I do not wish to keep in touch with you". Angry texts and emails followed, but I deleted them all on sight. Nothing was read and to this day, I haven't contacted her. She hasn't contacted me.

I had gotten my first relationship experience. It was highly

negative in hindsight, but the experience and what I learned during that time would help me deal with women like Kelly in the future. The pain of the abusive passive-aggressiveness has stayed with me, and I've not had a girlfriend or been on a date since her. The hole that she filled is still empty.

There are those Saturday nights that go by where I'm drinking alone at home, thinking about her. How much I miss her. How much fun we had at one point together. How big of a nerd she really was. I miss her. I do, to this day, and the logic part of me hates that. I realize that it's just a strong desire to have someone on my arm when it constantly feels like everyone around you has someone. There's a definite emptiness still inside of me that cries out for Kelly, but reaching back for her would be like an alcoholic reaching for that bottle of Jack. It would taste good right now, but you know that you would be paying for it in the future.

End

A Collection of Memories

Bianca Gomez

The best time to cry is at night when the lights go off. That way no one sees your tears or hears your cries. My mother's screams were much more powerful than any sound my sister and I could ever make. No one could hear us cry ourselves to sleep. It had been that way for a long time.

1/23/91

Last night I woke up to my mom's screams for help. I thought I heard her calling my name in my sleep, but I woke up all of a sudden to her screams right next to my bed. I didn't know if I should run to her or if I should run to the phone and call the police as they had taught us in school. I peeked through the blanket that kept my sister and I warm in our bed and I could see my mother trying to get away from my dad as his muscular body shook her fiercely without stopping. His big hands had a good grip around her neck. I didn't know how my mother had screamed my name so loudly with his hands squeezing her neck with all his might. I felt like his hands were gripping my neck too as I struggled to take a breath. I couldn't believe what I was witnessing. But how much help could I give her? I was only six years old and not even half the size of my father.

I looked at my own hands through the dark with the glare of the street light that came through the window; I didn't think my hands had enough strength to pull my dad off of my mom. I pulled the blanket over my head and coved my ears with my hands. I didn't take them off until I couldn't hear my mom scream anymore.

1/24/91

My mom didn't leave the room much today. Brenda and I had cereal for dinner since I am not allowed to touch the stove. Nobody seemed to remember what happened the night before and I was afraid to ask any questions. My mother's face looked a bit strange because one side of her face didn't match the other. Her eye was smaller on one side, but her lip was bigger on the other. She looked like a stranger to me. She didn't seem like the mom

that put band-aids on our cuts or ice packs on our bruises or the mom that told us everything was going to be ok when we started crying. She didn't look like my mom because my mom doesn't cry.

She told us she was sick. We made her some get well cards when we got home from school. Hopefully she'll feel better tomorrow.

5/14/94

With the years I have become accustomed to see blue and black marks on my mom. She tries to hide them but we all know. I think it happens when I go to school too and I feel bad that I can't do anything, that I can't be here to help her. I have sworn to myself that I have to do something next time.

10/28/94

Last night it happened. I took action. I heard my mother cry for help again. I woke my sister up and we quickly made our way to my parents' room. I don't know why I took my time to silently and slowly open the door, there would be no way my parents could hear us anyway, but I still did. We peeked in and saw my dad was suffocating my mom with a pillow. She was jerking her legs up in the air and waving her hands trying to reach for my dad's arms. We could make out her right ear at the end of the pillow. We could still hear her smothered voice and make out her pleas. My dad's back was to us and I immediately jumped on the bed and landed on my dad's back. I grabbed hold of his shirt's neck and tore it down as I fell on to the bed. I made my way back up to his naked back and started screaming at him to let her go as I bashed him on the head with my hands. He reached for my hands and swung me off of him. He stood still in the dark and all we could hear was my mom trying to catch her breath. He got up and left the room. My mom and my sister looked stunned at what just had happened. She sent us back to our rooms and told us everything was ok.

6/15/99

My dad got arrested today when a neighbor called the police. The fight was about money, like always, but this time he trashed the apartment. He turned the table upside down spilling the soup my mom had made that evening. She fought back this time and scratched my dad's arms and neck, but still got struck in the face.

The police took pictures of my mother's face and the big hole that my dad made on the wall with his knuckles. There was also glass everywhere from the flower vase that had shattered when it hit the floor. The kitchen chairs were upside down and one even had a crooked leg from when the table landed on top of it. The walls had spots of blood on them from the starches my mom had been able to make on my dad's hands. The police asked me most of the questions when they saw the terror in my little brother and sisters' face. Even though they didn't know exactly why the cops where here, they knew they were going to take daddy away.

They must have thought I was crying to see my dad taken away in a police car, but I was crying because I was angry at them, at both of them; my mom for taking his shit and him for humiliating my brother and sisters in front of all our neighbors. The police picked the best place to interrogate me too, the hallway of the apartment building, where we had all our snoopy neighbors as an audience.

I told the police what I could recall and found myself adding details from previous fights as they all ran through my mind when the police asked me what had happened. "It all happened in a matter of minutes. Next thing you know my dad was already swinging at my mom and then they started wrestling with each other. The kids started screaming and crying while I ran to separate them trying to carry my baby sister with my other arm."

The struggle continued until there was a knock at the door. It seemed like somebody had pressed pause because everyone stopped what they were doing. Even my parents froze. We all looked at each other as if we knew who it was before we opened the door. The neighbors had heard my mother's screams.

6/16/00

Everyone was talking about my parents at the bus stop. The whole apartment building had seen my dad get arrested. They couldn't keep their eyes off of me and my sister as we walked up to wait for the school bus. It was more uncomfortable than having the cops interrogate me in front of all our neighbors because these were my friends, kids I went to school with. I tried to look them in the eye, to see if any of them dared to say something smart, to see if I could make out which one had made the call.

Today wasn't much of a school day. I couldn't keep my mind

off of my parents and what had happened the night before but I didn't want to make it obvious. Some of my friends were asking me if I was ok. I pretended I didn't know what they were talking about. I pretended like there shouldn't be a reason for me not to be ok, but inside of me I envied them. I wanted to have their parents.

My dad was waiting for us when we got off of the bus stop outside the apartment buildings by the parking lot. His eyes were fixed on me but I pretended not to see him as I kept walking towards the door. His stare burned me down while my friends began to whisper amongst themselves. As me and my sister walked closer to him, he told my sister to go inside the house but told me to stay.

I couldn't believe it when I heard him begin to apologize to me with tears in his eyes. I had never seen him cry. He said he was sorry it had all gotten out of hand, that he would never let it happen again. And for the first time that I can remember, he told us how much he loved us. He said he would change for us, his kids, but I don't know if I should believe him this time.

7/2/00

My parents went to court today and my mom dropped all the charges against my dad. She lied when the policeman asked her how long this had been going on. She lied about how many times my dad had beat her and she refused to enroll in any counseling sessions. They both think that everything just goes back to normal, but no one hears our cries at night.

End

Beeh

Kaitlyn Shaw

I wonder if Megan even remembers the day we met. It was nacho Friday in Crown Point High School's cafeteria, which consequently happened to be the worst day of my life thus far.

"What a son of a b—," I fumed, shredding any lingering notebook paper within my reach with explicit rage.

"Katie," Rebecca interrupted me, "this is Megan."

"Hey," I sneered, eager to continue my bad mood. The recent discovery of my boyfriend's "extracurricular activities" just about ruined my urge to meet new girls. However, I looked Megan up and down briefly before deciding that she was too skinny, to clean, too nice-looking for me to befriend.

And so our mutual hatred began. I only saw her during the lunch hour, where we ignored any sign of each other's existence. Though I pretended to focus my attention elsewhere, I watched her from the corner of my eye, flirting with every boy that approached our corner table, obsessively picking through her fruits and vegetables, cracking jokes that caused any nearby listener to laugh uproariously. Likewise, I noticed her glancing toward me at times, studying my carefully pre-planned ensembles and silently critiquing every word that escaped from my mouth.

Jealousy thrived so tangibly in the air between us; you could scoop it up in one of those Friday nachos.

It seemed as if we only had one thing in common besides our social standing: We were madly in love with boyfriends who repeatedly broke our hearts.

During the summer prior to our senior year, Megan finally mustered up enough courage to remove that nasty stain from the threads of her life, while I stood idly, shrouded in filthy garments. For this, I resented her even more, and I reveled in the rare days that Dustin reached for my hand.

After months of unspoken battles, Megan and I finally prepared for war in journalism class on our first day as seniors.

I longed for years to write a column about the negative aspects of long-term relationships and young marriage, and my moment to shine finally came one day in seventh period.

"And Katie is doing a con on long-term relationships. Who would like to write the pro?" the journalism teacher and head of the school newspaper, Mrs. Elston, scanned the room with her beady eyes. Who better than my nemesis to grab the first opportunity to destroy me? At once, Megan Murphy's hand shot into the air, and at last, we embarked on the journey that would soon solve life's most important questions: Who was prettier? Who was more popular? Who was better?

As the end of the month drew near, Dustin and I started to break out in full-fledged brawls in the middle of the hallway daily, which helped tremendously in the progress of my column. On deadline night, I had in my possession a magnificent piece of writing, but I also developed lunacy and border-line acid reflux from the anxiety of relentless arguing.

"What should I do?" I pleaded with a girlfriend Kat Riley, as tears automatically began to stream down my cheeks.

"Dump him," Kat responded, eyes unmoving from her computer screen. Ms. Independence did not understand, or care.

I scribbled absentmindedly in a notebook, not caring that mascara was dripping from the edge of my nose, when I heard the screech of a chair and the shuffle of feet beside me.

"Dustin's being a jerk, huh?" Megan plopped her books down and took an I-pod from her jacket pocket. "Here. Listen to this—it's a song I listened to a lot when John and I broke up."

I wiped the tears from my eyes and hesitantly lifted the left earphone to my ear. 'Cause there's no more trying to make this so right, there is no more trying tonight. I began to sob—not only because the lyrics related so closely to my situation with Dustin, but because I underestimated the small, dark-haired girl that got on my nerves so frequently.

"What happened?" she asked with genuine concern. I did not even think twice about holding back, and my feelings rushed forth like diarrhea after a particularly bad nacho Friday.

After that moment, I no longer cared about our opposing columns (although mine triumphed, of course), and Megan and I became best friends. We went out to football games, the mall, Starbucks, late night drives, stalking ex-boyfriends—you know, normal teenage girl things. Our affectionate nicknames for each other went from Katie and Megan, to Kiki and Fifi, and finally ended up being a one-syllable sound "Beeh" for both. We made one an-

other laugh so hard, we both ended up slouched over on the floor with tears in our eyes. We complimented each other to a degree that strangers often asked if we were related—and I felt as if we were.

And then came Tony.

Before Megan and Tony started dating, I knew him solely as "that religious kid" who was notorious for his Christian preaching. After a few days of courting, Megan was already a changed woman—from atheist to Christian, cusses to prayers, and parties to youth group. I didn't mind this positive transformation because it changed me for the better too, however there was just something about her new love that seemed untrustworthy.

Tony and I got along all right—we didn't talk much. I suppose he sensed that I could see right through his wholesome exterior, and I knew the truth about him would surface in only a matter of time. That time came after a full year of dating—Tony approached Megan and revealed that he "needed to spend more time with God." We later discovered that the time slot put aside for God was actually being filled by fourteen year-old Carly Hough, complete with zits and braces.

They reunited, to my dismay, after a month of Megan's crying, rebelling, and tantrum-throwing. I looked upon Tony with utmost disgust, and took every available opportunity to bring his Christian hypocrisy to attention. Around Megan, however, I tended to keep my mouth shut because I was still struggling in my relationship with Dustin, who now openly enjoyed a new hobby—smoking and selling marijuana with some white-trash friends.

I was convinced that their relationship would finally come to the finish line when Tony wrapped up our senior year by cheating on Megan after an alcohol-induced poker night with his friends, but they continued onto college together at Purdue University Calumet where I had to endure their long "talks" nightly about trust and love and marriage and commitment.

One night, Megan stayed late after class for a meeting with her discussion group, and Tony and I were stuck alone together for a couple hours. Not knowing where to begin, we started wandering aimlessly around campus, barely living on awkward small talk. Little by little, however, our conversations started to veer toward more interesting topics and I was able to let down my larger-than-life guard.

As the sun was setting, we climbed up the steps of the parking garage to the very top, and looked out over our classmates coming for night classes and leaving at the end of their day. I couldn't help but notice how long he held my gaze and how he smiled at everything I said, and the extra attention made me slightly uncomfortable. I shrugged off the uneasy feeling, relieved that Tony and I could have a civil and even thought-provoking conversation without Megan playing mediator.

From that moment on, Tony and I looked forward to spending two hours every Monday and Wednesday night together, waiting for Megan. I loved to challenge his lectures on the Bible and he loved to dispute every challenge I could come up with.

For a variety of reasons, Megan couldn't handle her distrust in Tony, and they broke up in early October. Tony and I continued our friendly meetings, but one Monday, Tony single-handedly changed our relationship from just friends to something somewhat unexplainable.

"What?" annoyed, I answered my phone, a wad a Kleenex hanging from my nose.

"Where are you?" Tony responded.

"I'm sick. I am not going to class today."

"What are you talking about? Yes, you are. Get out of bed, I am coming to get you; it'll make you feel better. What, you like soup? What kind?"

"Lemon rice," I buried my face in the pillow, contemplating the decision.

"Okay. I'll call you when I'm there."

Tony and I spent most of the afternoon at Around the Clock. He vented about the break-up between him and Megan, and I related with stories from my recent break-up with Dustin. After class, he drove me home, and at the door, presented me with a CD he had compiled with songs he thought I might like. Embarrassed, I quickly said thank you and goodnight, closed the door behind me, ran upstairs to my room, and shoved the CD immediately into my stereo. As each song played, I couldn't help but smile, cursing myself for letting it come to this.

Where was Megan during all this, you ask? She decided to distance herself from anything that reminded her of Tony—including me. We saw each other about twice that month, and the meetings usually turned into a gab-fest about what Tony might be up to.

"I think he might like you, Beeh," Megan confronted me one afternoon.

"Yeah right," I lied, and instantly changed the subject.

Tony liked me. We met in semi-secret about every night—after school, after work, after church. On October 15, Tony called me and told me that we needed to "talk"—never a good sign. I predicted that our pointless flirting was about to come to an end, one way or another.

We met that night by a gazebo in his subdivision in Ellendale Farms. He waved at me from his car window, and I hopped into his passenger seat.

"What's up?" I warmed my hands at his dashboard vents while we avoided the real topic at hand for a good thirty minutes.

"Okay, the problem is," he finally busted out, "I like this girl."

"Oh, yeah?" I felt panic hit me hard in the chest. This was it.

"Yeah, a lot, but she's not really a Christian. I was talking to Ashley Anderson about her the other day and she gave me some really good advice. She said that I if I really liked this girl, I should go for it and maybe something good would come of it."

"Yeah, you should probably let her know how you feel." I leaned my back into the passenger side window and propped my knees up in front of me, but it was too late to hide. Our eyes connected and the next thing I knew, his hands were in my hair, our lips touched, and I lost myself in the moment.

The next night, Tony planned a bowling rendezvous with some friends. Feeling guilty, I invited Megan along and she accepted. As we were fixing our hair in her bathroom mirror, I felt a pang of something that seemed so familiar. Yes, it was—jealousy was back, rearing its ugly head from years of sound sleep.

Megan and Tony got back together two weeks later, and Dustin and I followed suit shortly after. Needless to say, Megan found out every detail of my affair with Tony, and our relationship rewound itself all the way back to nacho Friday of junior year.

Even after apologizing in a long, drawn-out letter, Megan sided with Tony's version of the story and stopped all contact with me. We formerly agreed to stand up at each other's weddings, but I'm still waiting for an invitation for her day on May 21, 2008 that I know will never come. Her Christmas presents have gone unopened,

letters unanswered, phone calls unreturned. I am currently in a relationship with a man I am convinced would get along very well with Megan and Tony, but our friendships now seem so vague, I can barely remember Megan's bright, brown eyes, or Tony's dimples when he smiles. All that remains is the burning question of who, now, is really the better person?

End

Reconciliation of Truths

Christen Chapman

They say that truth is a verified or indisputable fact, principle, or the like. For me, the truth was a savvy shape shifter, one that leaked through the holes of my reality every now and again. Sometimes I could swear my body ran on empty searching for the truth; the truth about him, the truth about us. But I guess I can't complain. After all, I knew he was all wrong for me. We were raised so differently; we had entirely different plans and incongruent values. Now looking back I don't understand how we ever ended up together. Well, I mean I remember falling in love...I just don't see how we connected. Who knows, maybe we never really did.

"Hey, what's up?"

I had turned around just in time to see a cute stranger and his friend beckoning me and Jessie over. They were both leaning on a beat up Monte Carlo at the end of the parking lot and I didn't recognize either of them. We both exchanged nervous smiles and approached the vehicle. I walked up first and introduced us, like always.

"Hey Christen, Jessie. I'm Johnny and this is my friend Derek. What are you ladies up to tonight?"

"We just came from the football game...we were waiting to meet up with some friends of ours but I think we may just start heading home," I replied trying not to notice Johnny looking Jessie up and down.

Johnny was already getting on my nerves. He had one of those laughs that made your ears seem to go into temporary shock. He was also very scrawny for being eighteen. I could tell that he and Jessie were going to hit it off, and I couldn't help but laugh to myself; they would probably be a good match. Derek on the other hand was taller than me, almost six feet tall, and I liked that. He had a short crew cut and his eyes were light brown. He spoke patiently, in such a way that I always found myself yearning for his next words. What struck me most about him though, was his sudden interest in me. He kept trying not to stare but it seemed to me that every time I looked over he was stealing another glance.

"So," said Derek, breaking the silence. "Can we have your numbers?"

I couldn't help but feeling a little turned off. He barely even knew my name and already he was hitting on me. He must have noticed the look on my face though because then he tried to take it back.

"I mean her number, you know for Johnny," he remembered, almost too late.

I could feel the butterflies flocking around my heart. There was something about him, but I had just gotten out of a long relationship and I was hoping to be single for a while. Maybe we could just be friends for now or something.

"No, it's ok. Yeah, so can we have a ride?" I asked.

"Uhh, yea, sure," Derek said now beginning to blush.

This was the beginning of truth stepping aside and allowing ignorance to take its place. I left that evening feeling in control but the truth was that from that moment on, I was hooked. I gave Derek Jessie's number for his friend, and they called us a few days later. At the time, Derek and I were both ending serious relationships but we still saw each other a lot. In fact, before I could even really rest from the saga of my last relationship my head began to fill with excuses and my heart with Derek. Our first kiss, our first Valentine's Day, every moment seemed so strong; some stronger than myself. I can still feel the fretful sensation of first kisses turned to first lies. You know the feeling when nights under the stars somehow turn to nights alone. I think it is safe to say that it can be associated with the feeling of raw truth being 'chewed' for the first time. I could still remember the first time that I caught Derek in a lie. If I had only known that it would be the first of many, I may have been able to save my heart.

I was looking him straight in the eye and I refused to look away. I've heard that eyes can give you away; in his case they usually did. I stared for a minute or two waiting for him to peel his eyes from the TV, but I got no response.

"Who is she?" I stammered.

"I told ya, I have no idea...probly a wrong number by some idiot or something. I don't know, Christen," he sighed.

I looked in his eyes again and said nothing. My heart was starting to feel like it was going to get lost in my body it was moving so fast, but I knew I had to keep calm.

"Here's your chance to prove it then: call the number back now, in front of me," I demanded. "If you don't then I will," I hur-

ried to say as his mouth opened in protest.

"Fuck it," he whispered and dialed the number. Naturally he rested the phone on the shoulder opposite of me.

"Speakerphone, Derek," I whispered.

He just shook his head and put it on speakerphone. His forehead was glistening; was he starting to sweat? The phone only rang twice but it felt like forever. Then finally I heard a high pitched voice at the other end of the line that seemed to pierce through my heart.

"Hey, what took you so long?" she asked giggling like a little girl. "Umm hellooo? Derek? Are you there?"

The voice stopped but for some reason I couldn't breathe right. I heard so many bad things about Derek but I never wanted to believe them and now I could feel a huge ball accumulating in my throat and it wasn't going away. Supposedly he had cheated on the girl that he dated before me; I tried not to think about it. Looking up to see what had stopped the annoying sound, I saw that he had hung up. That bastard hung up before she could incriminate him anymore. I tried to keep my emotions in check but I could feel my eyes watering. I wanted to slap him but in fear of seeing his temper, I pulled it together for a moment.

"How do you explain that?" I whispered but he just stared at the ground. "Huh? How do you explain that, Derek?" my voice was growing louder.

"She's probably a girl Johnny met at a party and gave her my number. Your guess is as good as mine," he said yawning.

"How stupid do you think I am?" His apathy was running my patience thin. "I heard her voice too, you two have spoken before. Just tell me the truth, who is she?" He made no attempt to answer but only rolled his eyes in annoyance. "What the hell is going on?"

"I DON'T KNOW. How else do you want me to put it? And you say I can be mean but you make me this way. I swear to you that I didn't do anything and you either need to trust me, or leave because I'm sick of your accusations," he said as though this were a random occurrence brought on by my dear, overwrought heart.

I got up and walked towards the front door to grab my shoes and jacket. My heart felt as if Derek had pierced it with something sharp. I felt like such a fool after giving him all of me and never asking for much in return.

"Why don't you do me a favor," I asked. "Why don't you take some time tonight and decide if and when you're going to start being honest with me because if it's not anytime soon, I need to know."

"You know what, shut up. If you leave now, don't call me back in an hour trying to change your mind because I won't be here," he yelled jumping on the chance to explore the night with a guilt free conscience I'm sure.

I was in total disarray and I couldn't bear to listen to him berate me any longer so I ran to my car and jumped in. I frantically searched for a CD that would match my mood and finally settled on Lifehouse. How could he turn around and get mad at me? My mind raced as I tried to drive and I began to realize that this feeling of anxiousness wouldn't disappear until I had settled things with Derek. Reluctantly, I picked up the phone and dialed his number but after three rings it went into his voicemail.

"You gotta be kidding me," I said to myself as I dialed again. No answer.

Oddly enough I can still remember the songs on that CD, and I can still remember the serenity they brought me. Now looking back I can see that the truth was so obvious. At the time though, the truth felt as if it were scalloping my heart like you or I would scallop a potato. From that moment on I should have avoided Derek, my gut knew it and so did everyone else. My heart though, naked as he had left it, chose to secede from good judgment and move towards the jealousy, frustration and impatience I had tried for so long to bury. It was nauseating yet ironically fulfilling. We made up after I apologized for wrongly accusing him. Two weeks later when we were drinking I tricked him into admitting that he had given her his number, and found out that he had hung out with her several times. After I went spastic he stopped leaking information and I never got to find out just what went on between them but I'm sure there was something. The part about our relationship that baffles me most, even to this day, is why Derek kept chasing me. Why not just choose to be free and let me go? Oh, how I wish he had just let me go...

I opened the door to find Derek standing there, a dozen roses in hand.

"What do you want?" I asked with little emotion.

"Let me take you out," he begged, "to our spot. I know that

I made a mistake by lying to you and then being a jerk but everything is going to change between us, I promise," he put his hand on my cheek and my heart did a cartwheel but I pulled away to hold back from showing how I really felt.

"Why should I? What makes you think I want anything to do with you now?" He looked shocked for a moment then pressed on.

"Yeah I lied but it wasn't worth it and I learned my lesson. That girl is my friend I guess but she is nothing compared to you, babe. When I look at you I..." he looked away and I was sure I saw a tear in his eye. "I've fallen for you so bad and I don't ever want to do anything to mess that up, ever again, I love you," and before I could think straight we were having one of those amazing kisses that you know you'll remember forever and I decided to give in.

"I love you too, Derek," I said and as he turned towards the car I wiped a hidden tear from the corner of my eye. I was feeling so much better now that those nervous emotions were settling. I never dreamt that Derek and I would fall in love, and I decided not only to forgive him, but to allow hope to fill my heart, once again.

They say that love is never boastful or jealous...never mean or negligent. For me, love had become a rollercoaster ride that started with a hint of excitement and turned to a hint of insanity. You see, I really did love him. But like a flower awaiting the arrival of spring, I secretly waited for his transformation into someone who would love and cherish me. At the age of eighteen it was the craziest love I had ever felt; I was drawn to it. After four years of boredom and predictability, Derek was exactly what I thought I needed. Even at his worst, with his temper and his undeniable thirst to knock me down a peg or two, he became my stability. He had inadvertently become my weakness and rather than shower myself in the reality of the situation I chose to drown in denial and alcohol.

The bottle touched my lips and I drank until I felt sick. I was alone in my room with nobody else home. I picked up my phone in a drunken stupor and attempted to dial Derek and was again forwarded to his voicemail. Another huge fight over practically nothing but this time I couldn't bear to stay calm. After finding random numbers in his phone and watching him start fights on purpose I was still refusing to accept the truth: he was cheating on me. I still didn't have any proof, but I could feel it in my heart and each unanswered ring only reassured me of my fears. I picked up

the bottle and took a chug, spilling down my shirt and I lit a cigarette. Derek hated when I smoked and somehow it always made me feel better to have a cigarette when we fought; maybe it kept me from feeling like less of a fool because we were both keeping secrets. I fumbled around and pushed the redial button. No answer. Would I be a fool to think he might be at home, taking some time to reflect on our argument? Shit, I wasn't even sure why I was still home. If I had a party or something to keep my mind occupied I might have left but on this particular night, my plans had been to hang out with Derek and those had long since fallen through. I dialed a few other people that I thought might be out but again I got no answer. I just wanted to forget about Derek, and about all of the girls who were obviously chasing him. Most of all I wanted to forget that he was currently missing in action and pissed off...not a good combination. I set down the vodka and slowly I picked up another bottle, a different bottle. One, four, twenty, I don't really remember and just like that at 8 p.m., I was out.

Half a bottle of sleeping pills and half a fifth of vodka…I consumed them both. I was angry to wake up and head off to work but what I should have been was thankful. Thankful that I woke up the next day, thankful that I wasn't in the ER, thankful that God was giving me a chance to not only see the truth, but to accept it.

I later found out that Derek had gone to a party that night and I heard rumors of him having sex with a girl in one of the bedrooms. I wish I could tell you that I ended everything then, that I told him I deserved better and walked away. However, that would not be the story of Derek and I. With nothing to base my accusations on besides rumor and pure instinct, I stuck around and allowed the truth to tiptoe past me undetected until finally, a year or so later his angry ex girlfriend informed me of their affair that had been going on since the beginning of our relationship. After trying many lies, Derek finally admitted to cheating on me and I am proud to say that I walked away from him...and never looked back. Even throughout the heartache and verbal abuse, the cheating and the lies, I don't regret a moment with Derek. Going through such an experience has not only strengthened my trust in myself but allowed me to accept that regardless of how much I try to deny it, the truth will always be a verified, indisputable fact waiting to be discovered.

End

In This Issue:

Elisabeth Hoernig
Aimee Huizenga
Mark Farner
Sarah Grabarzyk
Alicia Fermatt
Todd Reed
Katie Ramsey
Lauren Comer
Michelle Moore
Ryan Hayes
Kristin Hannagan
George Fountoulakis
Michael Tolliver
Linda Milom
Joe Hayes
Krystle Krucek
Greg Rucinski
Bianca Gomez
Christen Chapman
Kaitlyn Shaw

Department of English and Philosophy
Purdue University Calumet